F. PANFEROV

BRUSSKI

THE SOIL REDEEMED

$2.50

BRUSSKI:

THE SOIL REDEEMED

By F. Panferov

BRUSSKI: *The Soil Redeemed* not only presents a new standard for books out of present-day Russia, but is one of the modern outstanding translations to have been brought to this country. Its theme is the collectivization of a Russian village: it is written in a warm, simple style. And style and content together are somehow reminiscent of stories of American pioneering, excepting that instead of the success of an individual we are shown the trials and triumphs of a whole group who function as one. But the simplicity and the struggle against weather and famine have the same deeply sympathetic and human quality.

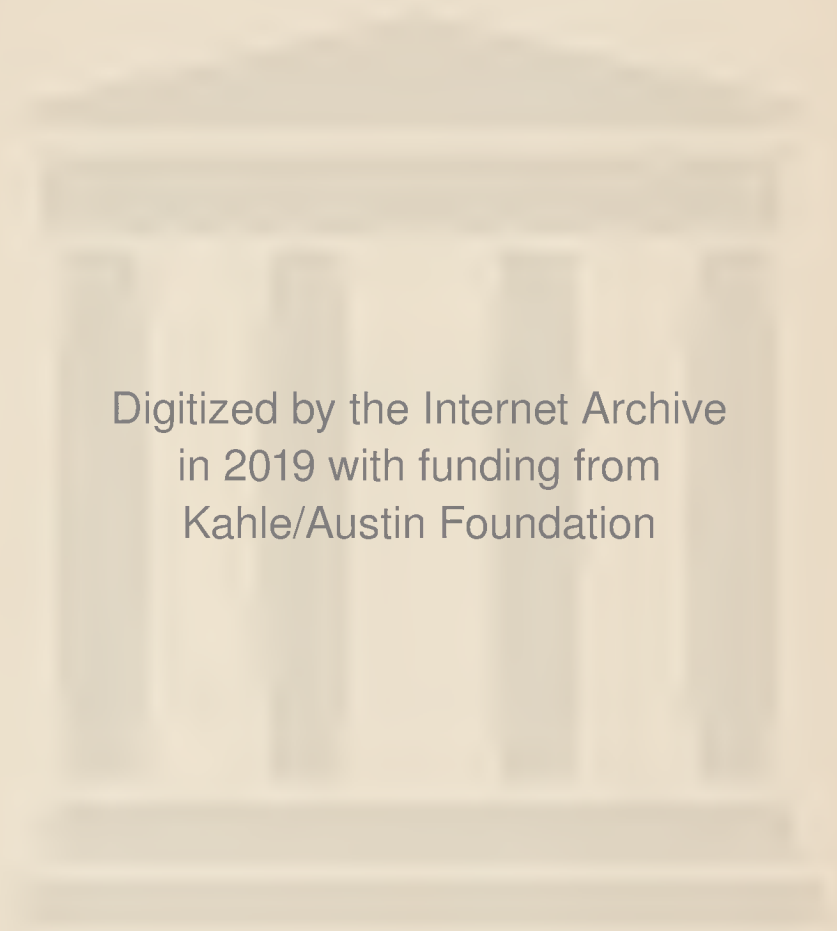
BRUSSKI: *The Soil Redeemed* is a mass of exciting incident and a series of rising climaxes.

On Brusski, a plot of waste land which has been hoarded in sterility for years, first by the local lord and then by the rich peasant—the kulak—who has tricked him out of it, a group of poor peasants start to build a communal farm. More and more people are drawn into the enterprise against the background of which is shown an exciting and moving life. Bandits sweep in and out of the village; there are marriages and deaths. There is a drought and at the climax of the book peasants and villagers are induced, against the tradition of years, to work with mad passion, at a dam, instead of only to pray for rain.

(Continued on back flap)

Bill Lensing
- 4-12-40

BRUSSKI



Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2019 with funding from
Kahle/Austin Foundation

https://archive.org/details/unset0000unse_w2i0

BRUSSKI

A Story of Peasant Life in Soviet Russia

By

F. PANFEROV

TRANSLATED FROM THE RUSSIAN
BY Z. MITROV AND J. TABRISKY

NEW YORK
INTERNATIONAL PUBLISHERS

PRINTED AND MADE IN ENGLAND BY
THE GARDEN CITY PRESS LTD., LETCHWORTH, HERTS.

THE FIRST LINK

I

THE remains of last year's haystacks were heaped untidily on the floor of the barn. The barn looked dull and dirty, yellow blades of grass pushing through the manure. Down the slopes of the Krapivny valley, the streams bubbled and chuckled sleeplessly in the ditches. The grey, broken fences of the vegetable gardens, full of holes, were shadowed by the pink wild cherry trees, and snow oozed along the ditches, puffy like dough that is being kneaded.

For two weeks the Volga had been swelling and expanding, like a huge brown boil ready to burst at any moment, flinging blocks of melting ice on to the banks. The road which in winter led from Shirokoye over the ice had curved into a semicircle and lay almost buried under warm, slimy manure. On the opposite bank of the Volga it dived through the bare birch-woods, reappeared again and then was lost in a series of zigzags in the far distances of the Volga steppes. The villages scattered over the plains seemed like the footprints of a giant who had walked over the soft earth. Between the villages a narrow strip of mist, rising from the river Irghiz, stretched from end to end of the steppes.

Nikolai Pyriakin stood a long time watching the spring thaw and the quivering of the mist. Then he threw the basket of bran over his shoulder, clambered across the fence of the barn and made his way to the village, his feet sinking at every step into the mud of the hemp-field.

The sun warmed his back through the short leather coat, making him sleepy. He longed to escape, as he used to do when a boy, to the rock of Stenka Razin, to take shelter from the bluish spring winds, and to doze for an hour or two.

"And the cow? What about her bran?"

The thought vanished almost as soon as it had come, like a splinter of wood in a turbulent stream. Scratching the sticky mud off his peasant boots, he walked along to the

chalky bluff of the rock and, listening to the chirruping of the thrushes on the roof of Yegor Stepanovich Chukhliav's shed, he lay down on the sun-warmed stones.

With the spring mists, a heavy sleepiness crawled over him. His lids drooped, his head sank on to the warm stones of the rock, and his whole body was filled with a pleasant restfulness. The longing to fall asleep aroused in him an irresistible desire to throw off the heavy peasant boots from his feet. They seemed to grow larger with every passing moment, to grow heavier and heavier until, through the haziness of slumber, they assumed the proportions of huge, jagged, outjutting mountains. He tried to throw them off—his feet would not obey him and, after a while, unable to rest and anxious to be up and doing, Nikolai overcame his drowsiness. He raised himself slightly . . . and quickly sat up.

A man was walking in his direction along the road over the Volga. Now cautiously and slowly, now hurriedly, at times up to his knees in water, he was walking towards Shirokoye. Standing motionless awhile on the edge of one reddish-brown hole (turning his head from side to side like a magpie on a bush), he would then jump on to the edge of another similar reddish-brown hole, his arms swinging to maintain his balance.

His eyes following the movements of the other man, Nikolai stretched himself, mentally gave him advice as to where it was best to jump, gesticulated and, observing an unsuccessful leap, growled in dissatisfaction.

"Where d'you think you're going? I told you to jump on to the other one, didn't I? Oh, you thickhead!"

When the man stepped off on to the broken ice and began to walk quickly alongside the road, Nikolai again lay back on the rock, his hands clasped behind his head, and pondered the reasons that would take a man along that road at such an untimely hour. Whatever the reason, it must be an urgent one. Perhaps the man had been to look for work in the town? Nikolai himself had but recently returned from Moscow, where he had been engaged as furnace stoker in a big stone house. Perhaps this man was also hurrying home from his work.

The brownish bark of the Volga crawled slowly downstream, its great mass moving with irresistible obstinacy. Nikolai realised it as he noticed how the road across the Volga gradually curved more and more and heard the ice

cracking as it bumped against the river-banks. He knew that warning sound well and knew, too, what dangers lay concealed in the Volga when, like a woman in labour, it began to groan and cast off its icy bonds. Vividly Nikolai remembered how, one day, just where the Krapivny valley dropped its huge, lacerated lips into the river, the landlord Sutiagin, and his *troika*,[1] had been swallowed by the river; the driver, Grigory Skulov, was a cripple to this day. Not for nothing was that watery cavern called the "Devil's Gulf." Nikolai knew the gulf only too well, and now, involuntarily, he glanced in its direction, where the greenish snow was swelling and bubbling.

For a time the man walked alongside the road, but, seeing his way barred by the water-filled holes between the ice blocks, he turned and started to walk towards the gulf.

"Oh, what a fool the man is! You can see he doesn't know his way about here. Where's he off to now?" thought Nikolai and shouted, "Hi-i-i! Do you want to die?"

The man made no response. Only the echo of the shout rang back distinctly from the gorge of the rock.

"Heavens, he can't hear me! What's to be done?" A dozen ideas flashed through Nikolai's mind—to dash across the man's path and intercept him? No, there's no time for that. It's impossible, the water's already over the ice on the banks. . . . To run and get a boat ready? No, no time for that either! . . .

"Let's try again, perhaps he'll hear me this time." He leaned forward and, putting his hands to his mouth, shouted with all his might, "Hi-i-i!"

The echo of the cry rang back still more distinctly from the gorge of the rock. On the right, the mouth of the Krapivny valley spat a huge grey mass of heavy snow out into the Volga. Then, as if at the word of command a thousand carts had started thundering along a stony road, the ice in the Devil's Gulf cracked and the roaring water, beating up foam, stormed tempestuously downstream.

"Hi! You! You'll do yourself in! You'll do yourself in for nothing at all. Hi-i-i!" Nikolai's voice broke from the strain of shouting. He waved his arms towards the boiling witches' cauldron. "Where's your head, man? Hi-i-i!"

He cleared the gorge of the rock in one bound and dashed down its steep, slippery side to the bank of the Volga. . . .

[1] *Troika:* a sledge or cart drawn by three horses.

The basket whistled through the air after him and the bran scattered in all directions.

2

Yashka Chukhliav, humming a jolly song, was in the yard repairing the cart.

"Oho!" he said, as the thundering crash rose from the river-bank and flooded the streets of Shirokoye. "It's burst!" he shouted and, striking the axe into a birch log, he reached the river-bank in two or three jumps.

The noise drew the people of the neighbouring houses after him and then, like sheep, the people of Zaovrazhenoye poured out over the Krapivny valley. Soon the high bank of the Volga was covered with a sea of moving hats, caps and many-coloured kerchiefs, all faded by the sun.

"The ice is moving on the Volga. . . ."

Like expert swimmers the huge ice blocks glided slowly but irresistibly downstream, surrounded by hurrying, eddying, bursting fragments of ice. Where the Volga narrowed, the blocks crashed against each other with a grinding noise, and piled themselves up into grey, melting masses.

"Well, thank God!" said Grandfather Katai, scratching his bald head. "That's the spring for us . . . now we're sure of a good harvest. Look—what big bubbles! Look, Yasha!" He slapped Yashka Chukhliav on the shoulder with a wrinkled hand.

"It wouldn't be bad to have a good harvest," somebody from the crowd put in quietly.

"Perhaps God will send it to us," added Grandfather Maxim Fedunov.

"Yes, there will be," assented Katai.

"Do you think so?" Yashka looked doubtful.

"Surely! Just look—and remember. If bubbles come when the Volga begins to move—a good harvest is certain."

Apart from the crowd, on the steep, chalky bank, a group of girls from Zaovrazhenoye had gathered to watch the river. They giggled noisily and, without knowing why, squealed for joy. In their midst, dressed in grey like a budding willow, stood Steshka Ogneva.

"Hallo, that crowd of womenfolk here too," thought Yashka, contemptuously turning away from them. Then he looked back at the girls, his glance resting on Steshka.

He had often seen Steshka before, hurrying along the roads in a short, torn coat, or returning with her water-buckets from the Krapivny valley. She had always made the same impression on Yashka as the red stone which lay in their yard—a stone and a stone.

Sometimes he met her at the evening gatherings in Zaovrazhenoye (where Steshka often went, while the other girls from Krivaya stayed at home in the evenings).

"You're the daughter of a Commissar," he smiled maliciously, coming to sit at her side, "and you've so many holes in your dress."

Silently Steshka drew her coat around her. "Look, she's got eyes like a badger—but they don't frighten me. . . . I know your sort."

"Idiot," she muttered.

Here, in the shimmering light of the spring sun, she seemed quite unlike the slovenly girl that he was accustomed to see. Somehow she had grown taller and straighter, had bloomed like a ripe plum, and, as she folded her arms, her breasts rounded the thin muslin of her dress. She held her head erect. Yashka's lower lip trembled slightly.

"There you are, dear Yashka, the harvest will be good this year, mark my words."

"Yes, yes, Grandad," Yashka agreed, and with an assured gait, his eyes still on Steshka, he moved along the steep river-bank.

Noticing his approach, the girls shouted: "Here's Yashka! Here's Yashka, the great lout!"

Olena Yastrebova, a pockmarked girl, nudged Steshka. "Look, Steshka, here's that Yashka."

Steshka's greenish eyes turned towards him. At first she shrank, as if expecting a large stone to fall on her head; then, seeing that he was looking at her, and at nobody else—and realising at the same moment that she was no longer a little girl, but a grown-up and attractive young woman whom all the boys of Zaovrazhenoye ran after—she flushed, straightening herself and pulling a wry face. She looked over Yashka's head to the distant stretches of the Volga and said distinctly, knowing that he would hear: "What does he want here? He pokes his nose in everywhere."

The girls laughed louder and, whispering and giggling, moved aside, leaving Steshka standing alone.

"What have you found now to squeal about?—Hallo,

Steshka!" Yashka cried, joking with the girls. "Hallo, I said, or don't you recognise me?"

"Why shouldn't I recognise you? A hare, at least, changes his fur, but you're always the same. You haven't lost your old ways."

"Oh, haven't you grown sharp!" Yashka laughed. "You're a sharp one."

"I've had my teeth cut. Who do you want? Zinochka Plakushcheva? There she is."

"And if I want you?"

"Oh, girls, hold me up! He's bowled me over, the devil." Suddenly, cutting her laughter short, she stared at Yashka. "Me?"

"Yes, you."

"I can't work spells."

"What?"

"I said I can't work spells. I'm not a witch doctor. Do you understand? Well, then, clear off. There's no landing-stage for you here."

"Look here, my girl," Yashka advised, "don't you throw insults about like that."

"Go to your own folk, or else we'll push you down the bank."

"We'll give you a bath, although it mayn't be the proper time yet," threw in Olena Yastrebova.

Drops of sweat broke out on Yashka's forehead. He had neither expected nor been prepared for such a reception, but he would not retreat, although he did not know how best he could turn the whole affair into a joke. At last he withdrew a few paces and, smiling, looked at the girls from under frowning brows, as grown-up persons look at children.

"I know . . . you've got many hands. They may be women's hands, but still they're hands—not sponges. Well, whatever happens, I'm ready; one against the lot of you." He stretched out his huge arms, like the shafts of a wagon.

"Ah!" Steshka burst out. "What a hero! He makes war on women."

The laughter and shouting of the girls mingled with the roar of the breaking ice. In a confused mass the faces of the girls swam before Yashka's eyes; he heard their stinging words, and wanted to rush away—but they had already surrounded him. Steshka alone stood aside, laughing loudly.

He shook himself together, and with one stroke of his arm

tore through the circle of girls and walked straight up to Steshka.

"Are you laughing?"

Steshka wrinkled her nose, as if something smelling horribly had been thrust under it. She wanted to say something that would hurt him, but looking at the powerful arms and at the obstinate face, distorted by mortification, she stared, as if rooted to the spot, into the depths of Yashka's eyes. They were large and grey, sternly authoritative. . . . Puckering her eyebrows, she drew her hands down her cheeks —that had flushed a deep red—and her eyes filled suddenly with unexpected tenderness.

Noticing the change, Yashka murmured gently: "Don't laugh, Steshka," and he touched her elbow lightly.

Steshka shuddered and turned away.

"Ah, you, my steppes, my steppes," she began to sing, but broke off abruptly and cried out, "Come along, girls. Come to Toronok."

"Broad are the steppes. . . ." Laughingly the girls took up the song and moved on after Steshka.

Yashka pulled the cap down firmly over his head, and wanted to follow them, but paused as a piercing shriek rang out suddenly.

"Good God, a man!"

Down below, behind the rock, where the ice lay on the Volga, like the shell of a tortoise, ready to burst at any moment, stood the pedestrian, waving his arms and apparently shouting something.

The people of Shirokoye pressed forward uneasily, and confused words could be heard.

"What shall we do?"

"He'll be drowned."

"Look at him."

There was a deafening crash, and the block of ice on which the man stood began to move slowly. The man ran forward and made a tremendous leap to the still unbroken part of the ice. The ice on which he had landed broke from the impact of the jump.

Again he made as if to spring across the yawning chasm of water, but the ice block tipped under his weight, the water came up to his knees, and he shrank back and was carried downstream, whirled round with the block of ice on which he stood.

"He's done for"—Grandfather Katai's words cut into the silence. "In a minute it will carry him to the Devil's Gulf—and that's the end of him."

The water in the gulf was boiling. Every block of ice that neared it was sucked into the eddy and broken into small fragments that were spat far out into the river as if from a mincing machine.

At first the block on which the man stood floated away from the gulf towards the opposite bank of the Volga. Then it turned in the direction of the valley and a tremendous cry, louder than the roar of the river, broke from all the people of Shirokoye, and was carried to the man.

"Up!"

"Run up."

"Get away from the gulf! Hi-i-i!"

The man jumped from one block of ice to another, falling on his knees, jumping up again and scrambling to another block. Once he disappeared completely under water, and for a short time there was no sign of him. The crowd stood dead still, waiting.

"Ah well, he's done for." Grandfather Katai flung out his arms in resignation. "He's gone for good."

"Look, look!" somebody in the crowd shouted. "Look, a boat."

"It's Nikolai. Nikolai Pyriakin!"

"So it is! Look!"

The people of Shirokoye stood as though rooted to the river-bank. Now, for the first time, they noticed Nikolai Pyriakin, his boat cutting through the water, clearing a way through the fragmentary masses of ice towards the man.

"Hold on," Grandfather Maxim shouted. "Hold on, my dear man. Hi! Hold on! Someone's coming to your help. Hi-i!"

The people watched breathlessly, and when the boat came right up to the man and Nikolai caught him by the collar and dragged him from the water, they broke into a long shout of admiration.

"He's a real hero."

"What a madcap!"

"Where did he spring from?"

"Come back! Come back quick!"

The boat returned with great speed. Nikolai used the oars

while the other man stood at the stern, pushing off the ice blocks with a long pole.

"Look, isn't it Ognev?" cried Grandfather Katai. "Stepan Ognev? He's been looking for land again, as usual," he added to himself.

The bow of the boat bumped into the bank. Ognev clambered heavily over the side of the boat and walked off up the bank amid a general silence. The water ran down from his short coat and homespun trousers, his face was scratched and bloody. Reaching Nikolai's house he swayed, grasped the jamb of the door and muttered:

"Haven't got the strength to get to my own place."

"Katya!" Nikolai called into the house. "Quick, Katya, the samovar. The samovar and something hot. What took you there at such a time, eh?" He turned to Ognev.

"They say that people dive to the bottom of the sea in search of fortune. That's what I did." Ognev smiled wearily, turned to look back at the Volga and, scarcely lifting his feet, stepped over the threshold of the hut.

3

A few days after Ognev's return from town, the people of Shirokoye, crossing the meadows and ditches, streamed into the village Soviet. At the entrance to the Soviet house the tall, sturdy Stepan Ognev stood leaning against the jamb of the door. At his side stood Davidka Panov, short, bow-legged, ginger-bearded and bald, looking uncommonly like a grotesque toy. Near the steps, close to the people, was the chairman of the village Soviet, Fedunov.

"Citizens," he began, "you know why we have met together here. This man"—pointing to Ognev—"has a word to say to you."

The people of Shirokoye interrupted noisily.

"Well, get on with the speech."

"What are you up to?"

"Have you thought of a new letter for the alphabet?"

Stepan Ognev took off his cap, ran his hands over his face, and looked about him. Then in a thick, strange voice, quite unlike his own, he blurted out the words:

"I want land, peasants. . . ."

"What?" Nikita Gurianov cut him short. "Land?"

"Yes, land. Brusski—just outside the village—it hasn't

been divided up yet. . . . The land is being wasted. . . . And so as it shouldn't be wasted, we'll take it. . . . We're going to form a fellowship of the poor. That is all I wanted to say."

For a moment the peasants were silent, looking at each other. Then came a burst of laughter.

"Ho, ho!"

"What's the idea, Stepan?"

"He's a lunatic!"

"Are you going to sharpen your scythes on the stones there?"

"Some brainwave!"

The laughter grew more boisterous and was carried along into the streets, frightening the blackbirds from the dome of the church. The birds flew up, circling over Shirokoye, and their notes rang out metallic and staccato.

Ognev twisted the cap in his hands, looking at the peasants as though he were lost. Then he recovered his courage, and, leaning against the step rail, he raised his fist and brought it down with all his strength on the table.

"What's the matter? What are you whining about?"

The laughter died away.

"What are you whining about, I asked? Are you at a circus? We've asked for the land in a good way, and if you won't give it to us, we'll find a law that will. We've been under your thumbs long enough."

For a moment the peasants stood still, like unripe rye on a windless morning.

"Aha! So that's what you're like," squealed Yegor Stepanovich Chukhliav. He shrugged his shoulders and sprang on to the steps. Taking off his stiff cap, he thrust it in front of Ognev's face.

"Don't you give him the land, citizen peasants. Don't you give it," he cried. "Just look what they've thought of. Enough! The ragamuffins. . . . So that's their idea. . . . Just let them try. . . ."

Chukhliav's last words, like the chirp of a sparrow, was lost in the roar of the Shirokoyans.

Fedunov, the chairman, tried to restore order, waving the counting-frame over his head and banging on the table. It was as though he were sitting at the bottom of a deep, clear river, moving his lips and waving his arms; no sound could be heard coming from him. . . .

Then Zakhar Kataev mounted the steps. Zakhar was absolutely illiterate—he called the written figure eight "that curly thing." In spite of this, he was better acquainted with the laws and regulations than some men are with their wives, and his knowledge had won for him the admiration of the whole village. When they spoke about him, the peasants would say: "Our Zakhar's got a head like a minister's. . . . He ought to be a people's minister, and not rot here with us in the ditches. . . ."

"You don't know how to manage people," he said now, and gently pushed Fedunov aside. "The Soviet power. . . . Go on, get along. . . ."

"But Uncle Zakhar," Fedunov protested, "just look what they're doing."

Zakhar waved him aside and scratched his head vigorously with a rough hand. He found a wisp of straw in his hair and drew it out.

"Stop that, stop that howling," he cried. "I want to say a word or two to you."

"Stop that noise," some of the peasants cried.

"Shut up!"

"Where do you think you are—at the inn?"

The peasants grew silent, as silence comes when a cart that has clattered deafeningly down a slope falls at last into the river. Here and there a hothead could still be heard, but his neighbours turned angrily towards him, and everybody was quiet. They could hear Grandfather Katai's wheezing breath, from where he sat on the steps, and the spring water bubbling in the ditches.

Zakhar's voice cut into the silence. Breaking the straw that he still held in his hand, he said: "Was it not for your sake that I suffered with the Bolakov peasants?"

"That's so."

"Well, then, suppose he did suffer?"

"Good," Zakhar answered, throwing the bits of straw away. "So you admit it?"

"We do."

"We admit it—what's there to talk about?"

"Good, and wasn't it for your sake that I went to Moscow to see Lenin?"

"You went all right," Nikolai Pyriakin shouted from the crowd. "But what do you want to talk about that for now?"

"Good." Zakhar lifted his head. "And didn't Lenin

understand what we wanted, and didn't he give us meadows?"

"Yes, he did give us meadows."

"And we've thanked him more than once."

"If he hadn't given them to us, the Bolakov people would have them now."

The peasants were growing excited, and interrupted each other.

Zakhar paused for a moment. When the noise had settled down, like dust settles on a high road on a still day, he leaned forward and, prolonging and emphasising each syllable, cried:

"And—did—not—the mas—ters used to whip our fathers?" He uttered the last words with all the strength at his command.

As though the words were a blazing firebrand flung into their midst, the people shuddered and drew back uneasily. Then, in one voice that seemed to pierce the air like a factory siren, their answers burst upon Zakhar.

"Don't talk about that."

"Why do you want to open old sores?"

"We're not talking about that now!"

"That's all finished and done with."

In the evening greyness the tattered hats and faded caps swayed stormily and the peasants, with bloodshot eyes, clenched their fists above their heads.

Zakhar leaned back and waited. Then he jumped up and cried, spreading out his arms:

"No! We must always remember the old days. We must remember our old wounds—that is why they were wounds. Listen to me! Our fathers were whipped by the old nobles. Whipped. And why were they whipped? you will ask. Because the nobles wouldn't let them lead a proper life. But our fathers would not give in—they wanted to live. That's why the nobles beat them. Isn't that so, brothers?"

The peasants were silent. They looked at each other, and then turned their eyes on Zakhar, wondering: "What's he up to now?" Zakhar too was silent, looking at the people of Shirokoye, and he thought: "No, your backs didn't bear the scars of the knout, or else you'd never be able to forget them."

Suddenly, as though a dam had burst, the peasants shouted in answer:

"Quite right."

"That's the truth."

"Only leave it alone, Zakhar."

"That's why they were whipped."

"Let it die."

"No!" Zakhar spoke again. "I shan't leave it alone. So you agree that our fathers wanted to eat, and that's why the nobles beat them? And that's why the nobles had their necks twisted, and our curse is on them for ever and ever. And Lenin gave us the land, and for that we will always thank him, and will always be grateful." He stopped and leaned closer to the peasants. Then, drawing himself up, he cried in a clear, ringing, unfamiliar voice: "And what are we doing now? What are we doing now? Ognev and his friends also want to go forward to a better life, and shall we whip them?"

Zakhar's voice thundered from the steps of the Soviet house, his arms cleaving the air right and left like the arms of a swimmer, and as he ended his voice died away, as though the shore had at last been reached.

The peasants shrank back and seemed to grow smaller, as though a great weight was crushing them down. They kept their eyes to the ground.

"I think they should have Brusski," Zakhar continued. "Perhaps they'll show us the way how to lead a better life than living on dry crusts and water. That's what I think, brothers; since we have got freedom, let every man manage his business as he thinks best."

His alert eyes ran from face to face among the peasants. They met the eyes of Yegor Stepanovich Chukhliav. The four eyes seemed to clash. Zakhar's large and blue under shaggy eyebrows, Chukhliav's like small black worms. The eyes bored into each other, fighting for a few moments.

Chukhliav gave in first. He lowered his eyes to the ground; Zakhar raised his head and sighed deeply.

4

Night hung over Shirokoye like a shaggy black cap. The mud squelched underfoot with the noise of a dog hungrily chewing meat. The peasants of Shirokoye were walking slowly back to their homes after the meeting, talking quietly to each other. Yegor Stepanovich Chukhliav was also

returning home from the meeting, his head full of whirling thoughts, and anger, darker than a gloomy autumn night, possessed him.

"That bristly dog Zakhar, what does he want?" he muttered. "Stepka wants Brusski—but what does he want? Always poking his nose in everywhere." Dragging his feet through the sticky mud, his thoughts turned involuntarily to the landlord Sutiagin. . . .

A long time ago, at about two *versts* from Shirokoye, the manor house of the landlord Sutiagin, a descendant of Prince Ermolov, had risen among the mountains on the right bank of the Volga like an eagle's eyrie. Sutiagin's pine-woods had stretched far into the Volga country, and his estate included the whole of Shirokoye. When he had been drinking, he would send for women from the town, wash his horses down with wine and commit a great number of other follies. He had squandered all his fortune, and possessed only the old manor house and Brusski, a part of his estate by the Volga.

Even before Sutiagin's affairs had reached that stage, Yegor Stepanovich had often cast covetous eyes on the house and the estate, and had thought, "Ah, if only I had even a little part of it . . . the things I'd do. . . ."

When Sutiagin, struck with paralysis, was left alone, Chukhliav willingly helped him to take his bath, led him into the open and did everything that was necessary for him. In return Sutiagin promised to give him Brusski. On his way to or from Sutiagin, Chukhliav never once failed to take the road that led by Brusski. He would touch the earth with his fingers, and taste it.

"Rich soil," he used to say. "If it was in good hands there'd be more bread than we'd know what to do with." And he made his plans. But events turned out otherwise. One day, while he was helping Sutiagin to take a bath—the invalid's hands and feet shook convulsively, and it was painful to look at him—Chukhliav asked foolishly:

"Well, Savel Ilyich, do you think your life is all over now?"

Sutiagin suddenly ceased to tremble. His eyes bulged, and he mumbled something unintelligible. Yegor Stepanovich's thoughts rushed ahead madly like spring torrents; he could scarcely keep pace with them.

"It was the devil pushed me to ask questions at the wrong time. . . . He might give me the slip even now. . . ."

He picked up Sutiagin as though the man was a bundle, and dragged him, still naked, into the house. There the man came to himself, and Chukhliav blew feverishly into his mouth and nose, and pressed Sutiagin's ribs with his hands.

"Oh, don't let him give up his soul just yet," he murmured. "Just let his soul sign the paper first, and then it can fly away. . . . There will be nobody to hold it back."

Towards evening Sutiagin recovered. He blinked his grey eyes and beckoned Chukhliav with a finger that resembled a small, knobbly carrot.

"What?" Yegor Stepanovich shouted, bending over him. "What? I can't understand," and he stretched out his hands.

Sutiagin frowned as if he was angry. He pointed to the window. Against the blue sky outlined by the window a vulture was flying over the fields. Circling lower and lower, the bird fluttered over the green grass and then perched boldly on an oaken post.

"Well, what of it? I can see it," Yegor Stepanovich turned to him. "The vulture is a useless sort of bird. . . . What about it?"

The vulture had scarcely settled on the post when it flew off again, lighted on the grass, then rose and disappeared into the birch-wood.

Sutiagin raised himself slightly. His large grey eyes seemed to be falling out of their sockets, and the words came hoarsely out of his throat.

"Life has gone by just like that vulture turning himself on the post."

"I don't want to hear about that." Yegor Stepanovich waved his hand. "You give me the land, give me Brusski. You've got no relations. No relations. Give it to me. You can't take it with you into the grave. Well, Savel Ilyich? I'll always pray to God for you, and my children will pray after me."

"The priest," Sutiagin groaned hoarsely.

Enraged, Chukhliav shook a grim fist under Sutiagin's nose.

"Do you see that? I shan't call the priest until you've given me the land. If you don't give it to me, you'll die full of sin." He ran to the corner, laughing hysterically and pointed to the ceiling. "You'll go up there with all your sins." Again he

bent over Sutiagin. "You'll suffer great tortures in hell, and you won't be able to get out of it. Do you hear what I'm saying, or don't you? You won't be able to cheat down there. . . . What do you think I cleared up all your mess for?"

In his rage he seized Sutiagin by the throat, and pressed it gently. Sutiagin quivered slightly and stretched his legs. His eyes stared fixedly at the window.

"Now I've done it," Chukhliav said. "I nearly had Brusski —and now——"

He searched every corner of the house, tore down the wallpaper, raised the floorboards and broke open several boxes. He found cards, photographs, scraps of paper, and threw them away furiously. He went out into the yard and searched the cowshed—still no treasure. His shoulders hunched, his face a dirty green colour, Chukhliav re-entered the house, and suddenly thought:

"Why didn't he let me make the bed? Why did he always do it himself?"

He rolled the body of Sutiagin—still warm—to one side. In the bed he found a tin box containing a number of gold ten-rouble pieces. On top of the coins were three sheets of paper. Chukhliav's hands grew numb, as if he had received a violent blow in the elbows: he could not lift them. He looked round hurriedly and read the top sheet of paper.

"For my funeral."

"They'll bury him just the same," he thought. "They'll bury him without the money."

Fearfully, he looked round again, then stuffed the money into his pocket. Having rolled Sutiagin's body back to its former position, he put on his cap and began to walk hurriedly to Shirokoye. Reaching the village street, he informed the peasants of the death.

"The landlord's given up his spirit. . . . He'd better be washed. . . ."

After that Chukhliav lived very quietly for two years. After the fire in Krivaya street he built a new house. It was not an ordinary hut, but a real house with a slate roof. The sheds were made of iron, and the fences strengthened with clay. Behind the sheds were stables, with cellars leading out of them. He had special locks made for all the doors, and carried the keys in a bunch, attached to his belt. He walked about with the air of a great landlord.

He would walk out into the yard, survey the buildings, and feel extremely happy.

"If there was a fire now, or thieves came . . . they couldn't hurt me. I always used to be afraid, when I went to the fields, or anywhere, that something might happen."

Passers-by would often stop to question him.

"How did you start off?"

"It's all from working hard," Chukhliav would answer. "It's all from working hard."

He did work. He bought a small wood, and cut and stored the timber. There were logs and beams and planks everywhere—in the yard, on the roof, in the sheds, behind the hut which was used for a bathroom. He bought a small piece of land behind the wood. His son Yashka worked, and Stepan Ognev as well. In summer Tatars and Mordvinians came to work on the land. Yegor Stepanovich himself, with a black-beetle in his pocket (for luck), would go out into the fields, examine the work that was being done, growl something under his breath and go home.

At home he busied himself all day with the broom, sweeping the yard and making everything tidy. The chickens made him particularly angry. "Beasts . . . why can't they do their business all in one place? . . . Curse them!"

He swore at the chickens and at the beetle, losing all his affection for the latter. But his mind was occupied with other thoughts. His wife Klunya was always complaining. For three years she had carried the gold in her bosom and groaned continually under its weight.

"The gold has made my breast sore. Listen, I can't carry it round any more. Hide it somewhere, anywhere you like."

Chukhliav was anxious to hide the money, but could not find a suitable place which would enable him to keep his eye on the money and check it any moment. This thought worried him at night, and he would lie at Klunya's side, holding the money tightly and listening to the mutterings of his wife.

"It's all rotting," Klunya groaned. "The worms are getting in. . . ."

"Put some ashes on it, ashes. . . . Wait a little while: have patience. I'll find a place. I'll hide it."

The thought would not leave him; it tormented him. Later, when he had found a hiding-place and had stowed the money away, he never for a moment left the house. He

would sit in the yard, stare gloomily about him and think.

"Who made the world? And the night? What's the night good for? A man can rest and sleep in the daytime. What's the good of the night? It only makes expense. You have to burn oil . . . and then it gives thieves a chance."

5

Here and there lights still burned in the cottages, throwing their bright rays into the puddles by the windows. Yegor Stepanovich crossed the street and walked towards Ilya Plakushchev's house. That winter they had decided to rent Brusski between them. And now Ognev had interfered. Yegor Stepanovich was going to talk the matter over with Plakushchev.

In Plakushchev's house a scarcely visible light flickered dully.

"He's only burning a night-lamp," Yegor Stepanovich thought. "He's a careful man. It won't be long before he's got a fortune. Of course he wouldn't burn a ten-candle lamp."

Passing the well at the yard, Chukhliav rapped at the window.

"Who do you want?" came from the house.

"Ilya."

The window opened and Plakushchev's large, shaggy head appeared. From the house came the smell of baked pumpkins.

"They're still eating pumpkins," Yegor Stepanovich thought. Scratching the window-ledge, he asked:

"Have you taken out the double windowpanes already?"

"Yes. . . . It's spring now. . . . They come in through the window, and they might break them, so I took them out."

The answer pleased Yegor Stepanovich. He decided that the following morning he would ask his son Yashka to remove the winter windows and hide them in the shed.

"Why didn't you come to the meeting?"

Plakushchev, pulling at the thick beard which was wedged between the window-frame and his chest, shouted to the people inside.

"Can't you be quiet for a minute?. . . It was two things at the same time. The cow was just going to calve and the

sheepskins were getting spoilt in the water: I had to take them out. . . . Did anything happen?"

"His mind's wandering," Yegor Stepanovich thought. "Sheepskins in the spring?" And aloud he said, "What people there are nowadays. . . . They're like dust, they go wherever the wind blows them. They ought to have their hands cut off. . . . But nobody has cut their hands off, and so they lift them high up. . . . And Zakhar Kataev turned them against us."

Plakushchev cleared his throat and whispered, staring into the darkness:

"The scoundrels! . . ."

"Do you know what," Yegor Stepanovich continued, "they'll try and get Cow's Island as well in the end, and then all our work will be wasted."

"Well?"

"Don't keep on saying well! Stepka has been to the town. The devil was looking up the laws about Brusski. I expect he was also trying to find out about Cow's Island. You'd better worry a little bit the less about your cow, or else you'll lose not only Brusski, but your own allotment as well." He leaned closer towards the window and whispered: "They do say . . . perhaps they only say it on purpose, that they've put an end to the Soviet in Ilim. . . . They're moving, but no one knows where."

6

The rumour whispered by Yegor Stepanovich Chukhliav at Plakushchev's window spread over the whole village like the wind before a storm. At first the people of Shirokoye spoke of it secretly. But by the evening, after a score of horsemen from the Red Cavalry had dashed through the village, the news spread like wildfire from door to door that Vasska Karasyuk and his company had crossed the Volga, although the ice was breaking, had attacked Ilim and put all the Communists to death.

"They're the men you ought to lie under," the widow Akulina Chessalkina shouted maliciously to her neighbour, Katya Pyriakina. "They're the sort you want."

Katya ran indoors to give Nikolai the news about Karasyuk. Nikolai smiled, slipped down from his bunk, scratched himself behind the ear and sat down on the bench.

"That's got nothing to do with us. . . . I wouldn't care if a dozen Karasyuks came."

Since the day that he saved Ognev's life, Nikolai somehow believed in him. Going to bed on the evening of the meeting, he had said to Katya:

"You can trust that man with everything you've got. He doesn't spare himself when he works for others, and that means you can surely trust him."

He fell asleep with this thought, and the following morning, returning from a visit to Ognev's hut, he told Katya that he had placed himself wholly in Stepan's hands. "Here do I stand, do with me what you will," and Nikolai stroked Katya's thin shoulders as he used to do before they were married.

"We'll get along better now," he said. "Don't grumble . . . and you'll get fatter: it's awful to look at you now. You'll cover up those bones, and perhaps you'll have a little baby, eh?"

Katya blushed, lowering her head in shame.

"That's got nothing to do with us," Nikolai repeated. "Don't listen to all their gossip. . . . And anyway—give me something to eat."

Katya rummaged in the oven with the oven fork. Its emptiness yawned like a huge dry mouth. She poured some greyish soup into a bowl. Her chin quivered and a mist rose in front of her eyes.

Nikolai believed in the fellowship, and so did she. And she would get a child and no longer bow her head in shame, and the women at the spring would no longer mock at her and call her barren.

"It doesn't matter to us, but that old witch said they're the men to sleep with—she meant me."

"She ought to have her neck twisted, then she wouldn't gossip so much."

"That she ought ; and——"

"Well, never mind about her," Nikolai said gently, and dipped his spoon into the grey soup. "They're always gossiping in the village, and you can't take notice of everything they say. This morning old Iron (this was the name Nikolai gave to Chukhliav) also dropped a lot of hints, but I sent him to the devil."

As Pyriakin spoke, he felt an icy shiver run down his spine. "A-ah!" He thrust it from his mind. "I'll have my food,

and then I'll have a good sleep and in the morning I'll go and see Ognev and find out all about it."

While he was eating the shivering increased. He asked his wife to take a look round.

The gentle, pleasant breeze of a spring evening came through the broken glass of the window. A dog howled piercingly in the ravine, then the howling changed into an angry growl.

"They won't touch us," Nikolai muttered, staring out into the darkness. "After all, we're not Communists. Why should they trouble us?"

He was silent again. The shivers ran more quickly down his spine, and anxiety stirred heavily within him.

"Foo!" Nikolai spat, tore his cap down from the nail and ran out of the hut.

In the darkness of the street, the noises of the peasants working in their yards and sheds triumphed over the sounds of spring. Gates squeaked as though they were being opened hastily, doors slammed, and there was the frequent grating of bolts. Against the darkness of the sky the peasants' lanterns flared palely, throwing gigantic flickering shadows over the thatched roofs. . . . The horses neighed and the cows were lowing in fear. Now and again an angry shout cut the air like a shot. . . .

Nikolai ran to Stepan Ognev's hut, the thin ice breaking at every step. Ognev's windows were dark, but the reflection of a lantern in the neighbouring yard illuminated the roof and the squat lop-sided chimney.

"I expect they're asleep," he thought, knocking at the door. "There's great things going on and they're all asleep."

"Who is it?" Ognev's voice came from within the hut.

"Open the door," Nikolai answered, and almost fell into the hut as he spoke. "The Cossack bands are here."

"Where? What are you shouting about? Have you had a glass too much, or what? Don't you know that drinking is forbidden in the fellowship?"

Nikolai's words had awakened Steshka. For a moment fear fluttered in her heart like a bird in a cage. Then she pulled herself together and smiled gently, rubbing her eyes.

Ognev, Grandfather Khariton, Grusha—Steshka's mother—and Nikolai Pyriakin were sitting at the table.

"The bands are coming, I tell you," Nikolai said, waving an arm. "Everybody's packing up and clearing out."

"Yes?" Ognev yawned. "Are we to believe that?"

In that yawn Steshka at once detected danger.

"O-o-oh!" Ognev yawned again. "If we believed everything we'd all have to change into hares. . . . We'd be running all our lives, and there'd be no time at all for work."

Hastily Steshka put on her grey dress, tidied her hair and swung her naked muscular legs over the side of the bunk.

"What are you doing, Steshenka?" Ognev turned towards her. "Go on sleeping. But . . . well, perhaps you'd better get up. . . . Better get up."

Ognev's words implied that he thought it necessary to be prepared for what the night might hold.

7

Together with the news that the bands had crossed the Volga, Yegor Stepanovich received a message informing him that the merchant Migunchik of Nikolskoye—a village about nine *versts* from Shirokoye—had bought two barrels of kerosene. To him this item of news was the more interesting of the two, and in the morning he sent Yashka on the brown nag for some kerosene. All day he waited for his son's return, cursing himself again and again for a fool. He feared that Yashka and the horse had been captured by the bands, and throughout the day he watched the road to Nikolskoye from the little window in his barn, like a hungry goat gazing at a bundle of green hay. In the evening, when the rumour of the bands had been trumpeted over the whole village, Yegor Stepanovich ran into the stable and spent a good deal of time rubbing ashes into the brown mare's back. The mare wriggled in pain and stamped her legs. Yegor Stepanovich growled at the animal, who turned her head and looked piteously at the quick movement of the hands and at the flickering shadows on the dripping wall of the stable.

Chukhliav rubbed until the blood came; then he fetched a bucket of water, emptied some warm manure into it, and, having stirred the mixture, poured it over the horse. He repeated this operation several times. Then he stepped back and grinned to himself.

"So that's done. What an old hag she looks! When they come I'll say to them: how can you ride that old beast? Just look at it!"

He unhooked the lantern and, having examined the horse

once more, was about to leave the stable, muttering something under his breath, when the latch of the gate clicked several times. Yegor Stepanovich started back.

"Can they be here already?" he thought. "It can't be—so quickly. No!"

The latch clicked more urgently. Voices could be heard from the gate. Not yet wholly at ease, Chukhliav walked to the gate, listened for a moment and then slipped the long iron bolt. Ilya Plakushchev came in first; he was followed by Sergei Pchelkin. The light of the lantern fell straight on Plakushchev's face.

"We-ell," he said, in a frightened voice, "there's a whole pack of them coming."

"Yes," Pchelkin boomed in a deep bass voice. "A little while ago a beggar came to my door and told me everything."

"Be quiet!" Chukhliav hissed. "Don't shout."

"Well I never!" Pchelkin's voice was still louder. "We ought to shout it from the roofs of the houses, and he says be quiet. Our salvation is coming."

He shrugged his shoulders and was the last to enter the hut. Yegor Stepanovich extinguished the lantern and called to Klunya.

"Hi, you! Where are the matches?"

Klunya looked for the matches and continued her search in the other room. Meanwhile Yegor Stepanovich considered the matter that had brought Plakushchev and Pchelkin. Like a fisherman hauling in his catch, he measured and weighed the affair, trying to discover his own part in it.

"You always keep the matches yourself."

Yegor Stepanovich remembered that they were in his pocket. He took them out slowly, stood on a stool and stretched out a hand to the small lamp.

"Here's the matches," he muttered, lighting the tiny lamp, and continued, although he was still thinking of the other matter: "I counted them a little while ago, and now there's five short. I only counted them this morning and there was eighteen, and when I looked at dinner-time there's five missing. Where have they got to?"

"Do you put matches in the inventory?" Pchelkin asked in astonishment.

"Of course I do." Yegor Stepanovich jumped down from the stool. "Of course I do! Do you think that all this"—he waved his arm in a circle that seemed to embrace the whole

room—"do you think that all this comes from nothing? No. How much blood there is in it! It's only them," Chukhliav pointed to the door, "who chatter about wealth dropping from the skies, as if it was easy as picking up cow dung on a shovel . . . pick it up on a shovel and that's all. No, my friends. You have to save. Sometimes I fancied something nice—but, no, I mustn't! I must wait. Me? Why, when I was in the Turkish campaign——"

"Well, now we can wait. He'll go on and on with his stories," Plakushchev thought.

"You should have seen the sort of man I was."

Pchelkin laughed loudly, but Plakushchev looked angrily at Chukhliav and interrupted him.

"This business can't wait, Yegor Stepanovich. You'll finish your story another time."

"All right." Shrugging his shoulders, Yegor Stepanovich regulated the light of the lamp. "Let's get to business."

Plakushchev took a sheet of paper from his pocket and laid it on the table, smoothing it out with his palms, and three heads bent over the table—Yegor Stepanovich's long and narrow; Plakushchev's large and bristly, with thin silver threads on the temples; Pchelkin's covered with a reddish growth that was as coarse as horse-hair.

"Here you are," Plakushchev whispered, "here you have the open and the secret ones."

Yegor Stepanovich leaned back, looked at Plakushchev's large head and then bent again over the table.

"Read it out," he whispered very quietly.

"Open Communists," Plakushchev began. "Stepan Ognev. He was a robber in nineteen-eighteen, he took three thousand roubles from Yegor Chukhliav and robbed many other peasants. His son in Moscow is also a Communist."

"Three thousand; that's right," Chukhliav confirmed, "and sixteen roubles more."

Plakushchev glanced at him and continued:

"Fedunov, chairman of the village Soviet, always assists the Communists. Davidka Panov, Nikolai Pyriakin——"

"Stop!" Chukhliav broke in. "Stop there. You can't have Nikolai in that list. In my opinion he oughtn't to be there. What sort of a Communist is he? Besides, he's my neighbour. You must take that into consideration."

"He's afraid of his neighbours," Plakushchev thought. He put his finger over the name of Pyriakin and went on read-

ing: "Garasska Yakushev is a member of the fellowship. That means he's with the Communists. Mitka Spirin."

"No-o-o!" Chukhliav again interrupted. "Don't you hide Nikolai's name! You cross it out; cross it right out."

"What are you afraid of?" Plakushchev took a sheet of paper from another pocket and laid it on the table. "You listen here. . . ." He held the paper to the light and began to read the words printed in thick type.

"'The Council of Three of the People's Peasant Army, under the command of Vassili Karasyuk, hereby declares that all power belongs to the people, and the people governs itself. Down with the Communists and the Commissars. Long Live the Peasants' Union. . . . I have an army of 40,000 men. . . . In Moscow——'" Plakushchev could not read what was written further, and turned to Chukhliav.

"Do you see? That's where the power is. The Sovietists are going under everywhere."

Yegor Stepanovich's whole face wrinkled.

"No-o, I don't agree with that . . . I don't agree with that. I won't have Nikolai's name among the open ones . . . and anyhow . . . don't think you can force me——"

They wrangled for some time, their angry whispers seeming to fill the room. They argued as to whether Nikolai Pyriakin should be included among the open or secret Communists.

"So you don't want to work along with us?" Pchelkin growled. "You're against us?"

Yegor Stepanovich kept to his one argument. "You must strike out Nikolai's name."

Ilya Maximovich also grew angry and put forward his own plan.

"First and foremost, the grain in the Soviet barn must be divided—that will bring all the poor peasants over to our side."

At this Yegor Stepanovich stepped apart from the other two and shook his head. "No," he said. "Maybe I don't know anything. I've never been village elder, and I've never been clerk, so perhaps I don't know. But I've never touched anything that did not belong to me. No. I wash my hands of it. No." His voice rose. "I'm not going to be mixed up in this business. . . . I'm not going to be mixed up in it at all." Quite suddenly and surprisingly, he added: "I'm keeping quite clear of it, and that's all. No, no. Don't you try and

persuade me, don't try to talk me over. Ilya Maximovich, I won't be dragged into it."

"You devil!" burst from Pchelkin.

"Wait, wait," Plakushchev said, taking him by the shoulder. "Wait. Let's talk it over. Let's talk it over together."

A hurried knock at the gate interrupted Plakushchev. He slipped the list and the leaflet under the tablecloth. Yegor Stepanovich took them out and in silence handed them to Pchelkin. Then he ran to open the gate. Yashka, exhausted and covered with mud, almost fell into the hut. Looking at Plakushchev and Pchelkin, he said:

"A meeting?" Then, in a louder voice: "The bands are in Nikolskoye. I just managed to get away. Look after the horse, father. I had to leave the cart at Nikolskoye. I'd love some grub."

He walked to the larder, snatched a lump of meat patty and ran out into the street.

"Where are you going?" Yegor Stepanovich shouted after him.

"Where I should go," Yashka answered and disappeared into the darkness.

8

When at about ten o'clock in the evening Fedunov saw the restless flicker of lanterns in the street, he realised that Karasyuk was somewhere in the neighbourhood and might be expected in Shirokoye that same night or early next morning. That evening he had also learnt that Pchelkin had been discussing the division of grain with several people in the village. All this gave Fedunov no rest. He sat at the window, staring fixedly into the darkness of the night. Grandfather Maxim was lying on the bunk, turning restlessly and groaning. Later in the night he began to speak.

"Give it up, my son. This is not our affair. . . . If you live with the people, you must do as they do. . . . You see, you stand quite alone in the village. You must go to the people and say to them: I give up my post. Here are the keys of your possessions. Do whatever you like. I will not stand in your way."

Fedunov was silent. For a moment he thought of going to Pchelkin, giving him the key of the barn and saying: "I give in. Even he"—Fedunov's thoughts were still on Pchel-

kin—"even he was all in favour of the Soviet power. He helped to break up the nobles' estates, and everything like that. . . . But now . . . he's right the other way."

He remembered that a fortnight before, when he was making a list of the peasants' cattle, Pchelkin had stated that he only possessed four sheep; but when the animals were checked it was found that Pchelkin had five. So Fedunov had written down five. . . . He remembered too that Pchelkin had threatened to get even with him one day.

"What a stinker the man is," Fedunov murmured. "What a swine. . . ."

"They're all like that." Grandfather Maxim guessed of whom his son was speaking. "All of them want the best for themselves. He hasn't got the name of madman for nothing —he is a madman."

They were silent. The beetles rustled on the walls and in the darkness the noise they made sounded like light rain. Dasha, Fedunov's wife, was sleeping behind the partition and muttering unintelligibly in her sleep. . . . In a few days she would give birth to her first child, and this worried Fedunov most of all.

Grandfather Maxim broke the silence. "They'll hang you for nothing at all. You listen to what I say. . . . You didn't take up your post at the right time. The people are wicked. . . . They'd hang you for a farthing. . . ."

"Be quiet, Dad . . . don't make things worse. You lay still there, and be quiet."

"Oh, these youngsters! They don't listen to us, they don't listen to their own wives. . . . Who do you listen to? Strangers?"

Creeping along the side of the street, somebody came up to the hut, scarcely visible. Holding his breath, Fedunov put his face against the cold glass and stared. . . . The man stopped, apparently feeling for something with his foot. Then, having stepped carefully over a puddle, the figure seemed to melt into the fence and glide forwards.

Not moving from the window, Fedunov reached for an axe under the bench, grasped it firmly and whispered:

"Look, father. It's that madman, Serka. . . . Look."

The grandfather sprang from the bunk, put on his torn sheepskin coat, and ran into the yard. . . . Fedunov drew out the axe—it knocked against the wooden wall. The man was already at the gate. Something scratched over the rough

wooden boards. The man moved on, stared in at the first window, and then crept, as stealthily as a cat, to the window at which Fedunov stood.

"As soon as he comes near I'll hit him as hard as I can —through the glass—on his head, and that'll finish it," Fedunov thought.

He raised the axe. In the darkness outside the man saw the gleam, jumped aside and ran, without thinking where he was going, to the other side of the street. Fedunov could no longer see him. Suddenly the night was pierced by a fearful shriek; then the silent darkness again stared in at the window.

9

Pchelkin came to his senses at dawn. He was lying in a puddle near Chukhliav's yard, his head resting against the wooden bench that was used for repairing the sledges. His head ached and buzzed, as if he had been drinking too much. His hands pressed into the mud, he raised himself to his knees and then stood up. He wiped his hands on a clean part of his coat and made his way heavily through a lane along the backs of the huts. On the way he remembered the events of the previous evening. Having left Chukhliav and taken leave of Plakushchev, he crossed the bridge and turned into Burdiashka street. Everything slept there. Only one light glimmered in Vassili Shlenka's hut near the spreading willow tree. Pchelkin stole to the window and peeped inside. Shlenka's shaggy head was bobbing up and down on the bunk; at the table sat Lukeria stirring something in an earthenware dish. Opposite her sat Manafa, secretary of the village Soviet.

Pchelkin drew closer to the window.

Shlenka turned his head, looked gloomily at Manafa, and said:

"What? Is trouble brewing again?"

"Trouble's brewing all right," Manafa answered in his thin voice.

"It serves you right."

"What good does that do you? Does it make you any easier?" Manafa smiled and turned to Lukeria. "It does, doesn't it?"

Lukeria only bent closer over the dish.

"They're worrying us to death," Shlenka muttered. "They want to make the village into a factory . . . want to make it good for everybody. They promise you a fairy-tale paradise. Yes!—you can wait!" He turned over on the other side. "Oh, how my sides ache!"

"What do you expect, you lazy thing? Lying there like a fat pig day in and day out," Lukeria blurted out. "The horse is up to her belly in dirt."

"Well, never mind the horse. It won't be buried under the dirt. And you, Manafa, what wages do you get?"

"Twelve roubles."

"Oh! I used to spend more than that in drinking. And you're stuck over your writing the whole day—for twelve."

Pchelkin withdrew from the window, walked towards the gate and looked into the yard. Somebody seemed to be trying to tear the stakes of the fence out of the ground.

"Who can it be?" he thought, and called softly: "Lusha!"

There was no answer. Pchelkin stared intently into the darkness. "Is it a man? Rather too big. What can it be?"

Against the grey background of the sky he distinguished the head of a horse. The animal was pulling the thin strands out of the fence and crunching them between its teeth.

"A-ah!" Pchelkin drawled. Unable to find the bolt, he climbed over the gate and came nearer to the horse.

"Good heavens, it's sitting down! What a miracle!" He bent down. The horse was actually in a sitting position, dragging its hind-legs as though they were broken. Pchelkin ran hastily to the hut. The door opened with a squeak and he fell inside.

"Vassili, an accident's happened."

"What are you saying?" Shlenka exclaimed, ready to jump down from the bunk. "What's the matter?"

"Your horse has got its legs paralysed."

"What?"

"Yes . . . the hind-legs. I saw her and she was sitting, sitting on the ground."

"Oh!" Shlenka was now quite calm. "It isn't the first time. . . . It happens every spring. They say she ought to have a powder, but I haven't had time to go to Alai for it. Sit down. We were just having an argument with Manafa here."

"That's all right. I was just passing by and saw the horse,

so I thought I'd look in and let you know. . . . And besides, there's a paper come from town, and it says the grain in the barn must be divided up. They'll do it in the morning, I think."

For some time they spoke of the grain and of Karasyuk. Then Pchelkin left Shlenka's hut, spoke to another peasant he met, who was greatly disturbed by his news, and went on his way to Plakushchev. Then he had turned back and stole along the side of the street to Fedunov's hut. He had scribbled something in chalk on the gate. Then . . . he remembered the gleam of the axe behind the window of the hut, remembered that he had run across the street and that two powerful hands had seized him just as he reached the corner of Chukhliav's house. The arms had lifted him and thrown him into a puddle, and his head had fallen against the fence. . . .

Now, in the cold grey of early morning, as he made his way along the ravine, he tried to remember all the details. . . . Tearing a way through the dense wall of prickly wild cherry trees, he shut his eyes and immediately the laughing and then furious face of Yashka Chukhliav floated before his eyes.

THE SECOND LINK

I

In the night, through the thunder of the breaking ice, the church bell boomed the alarm over the impenetrable darkness of the steppes. From the distance came the muffled explosion of shells, and over Nikolskoye fire, like the flaming jaws of a terrible monster, cut into the darkness of the sky.

From hut to hut, from door to door in Shirokoye, like an animal crawling through the mud, crept the rumours of the bands, of Karasyuk, of Cheka detachments, of the division of the grain. . . .

There was no rest in Shirokoye that night.

And in the early morning, almost before the women had had time to fetch water from the spring, when the sun like a red, squashed pumpkin had just risen over the pine-wood, three horsemen rode into Shirokoye from the direction of Nikolskoye. Their large hats were adorned with red bands and well-filled sacks were slung on their backs next to their rifles. Emelka Bondarchuk rode in front of his two companions. His black horse glistened with sweat. When they reached Krivaya street, they woke the whole village from its uneasy slumber with their Ukrainian songs. Apparently the village was well known to them, for they turned into the lane that led to the hut of Thekla, who distilled spirits.

The songs drew Pchelkin from his hut. At first, when he caught sight of the red bands, he wanted to hide in his shed, but when he heard the words of the song he laughed and exclaimed, fastening the belt of his trousers:

"Oh, what fine horses! What fine fellows! Dunya, I'm going to the Soviet."

"Get along with you," Dunya answered angrily. "Perhaps they'll make you a head shorter."

"Oh no they won't; don't you worry. We've got support now; just you give us time," Pchelkin replied with a smile, and began to walk towards Thekla's hut.

After he had walked a short way, a feeling of joy overcame

him, and he remembered his new, shiny calf-leather boots. He had brought them home from the cobbler's a few days earlier, had spread a mat on the floor and walked up and down for a long time, listening contentedly to the squeaking of the new leather.

"They are beauties. I've never had any like them before," he thought. Suddenly he was seized with alarm. "They'll take them away, the Whites or the Reds. That sort of thing happens very often. Last year they took a fur coat from Mikitka Pestriak, and a pair of boots from Yegor Zdobny. . . . I'll have to hide them."

He turned back and, from the door, shouted to Dunya: "Where's my boots?"

"What do you want them for?"

"Give them to me. Give them over here. Well, what are you making such eyes for? Don't you know who's in the village?"

He pulled the boots out of the chest and stared at Dunya with reddish eyes.

"Where can I put them? Where shall I hide them?"

Pchelkin and Dunya examined all the dirty, blackened corners of the hut.

"You'd better put them on, son," Grandfather Pakhom advised, from the stove.

"That's right. They won't take them off my feet."

Quickly he slipped off his boots, thrust his feet into the new pair and turned now one foot, now the other, the better to admire them, murmuring: "How jealous everyone will be."

He took a handful of soot from the stove, sprinkled it with some water, and rubbed the mixture over his boots so that they might not appear quite new and ran out into the street.

The three horsemen were returning along the lane. They were half drunk, their sacks were empty, and their songs still more gay.

"Hi-i-i! Ho-o-o!" Emelka shouted, spurring his horse.

The riders crossed the bridge. Their horses ran neck to neck between the two ditches, their sweating flanks touching. Then they galloped to the end of the village street.

A rifle shot rang out from the pine-wood. The horses started aside, their feet sinking into the yielding mud. Then they regained the street and tore back madly in the direction from which they had come.

The firing broke out again from the pine-wood. Two of the horsemen who were recrossing the bridge at that moment shuddered and fell forward in the saddle, their faces in the horses' manes, their hands dropping the reins. The third, leaning forward flat against his horse, dashed past Pchelkin.

Flourishing their swords, seven horsemen dashed out of the wood, following the retreating figure. Then they too disappeared beyond the village. . . . In a little while the people of Shirokoye saw the seven riders again. They were led by Stepan Ognev. They rode through the wood, appeared again on the far side, turned towards a hill and then scattered, riding until they were scarcely visible grey specks in the distance.

2

Karasyuk's company, having plundered the town of Ilim and being hard pressed by the Red Infantry, had taken refuge in a secluded valley known as the Bear's Hole, about forty *versts* from the town.

In the early morning, when everyone was still asleep, Karasyuk sat in his tent, which was fixed between three pine trees. He was clean-shaven and sunburnt, and a deep wrinkle furrowed his forehead as he stared into the distance.

The Tatar Akhmetka entered the tent, sat at Karasyuk's feet and, throwing back his head, began to intone a mournful, wailing Tatar song. Akhmetka sang of his far-away village in the steppes, of the two young wives he had left behind there, of the hot, tasty dishes he was wont to eat, and of the freedom and endlessness of the steppes beyond the Volga.

Karasyuk shuddered at the howling sounds coming from Akhmetka, glanced at the swelling, vibrating throat and shouted: "Shut up, Akhmetka!"

Akhmetka looked up at him from narrow, oblique eyes.

"Me sing, master. Akhmetka's soul sing oh, oh, oh. . . ."

"All right, I've heard enough of your soul," Karasyuk interrupted, and walked out of the tent.

The smoke from the camp fires rose lazily into the air from among the tents and hastily constructed huts that had been set up on the slopes of the valley. It curled and mingled in the thick branches of the pine trees. At the bottom of the valley, by the provision carts, the horses stood, ready saddled. A magpie perched on the branch of the poplar and babbled

shrilly. Then it flew down to one of the carts and began to peck at a piece of meat.

Karasyuk walked up the slope. Several times he eagerly breathed in the pine-scented morning air, stood still for a moment to watch the pale smoke of the camp fires, and at last sat down on the damp trunk of a fallen tree. The rotted wood crackled under his weight. Nearby a woodpecker sat on a birch tree, hammering with his beak. At intervals it would change its perch; the hammering ceased for a moment, then started again. It was the only loud sound that rose above the soughing of the wind. Everything else rustled quietly, as if afraid to disturb the stillness of the early dawn, and all the gentle, rustling sounds merged into one scarcely audible whisper.

Karasyuk listened attentively. At the slightest distinct sound he turned his head, trying to guess what it might be, whence came that rustle, that faint cry. The whispering grew louder with every passing minute. Here and there the branches whistled thinly in their movements, and the wind stirred the tops of the pine trees with a faint murmur, like water plashing against a high, distant shore.

Gradually these sounds drew Karasyuk into themselves, rocking him gently in their rhythm. His face buried in his hands, Karasyuk lost all consciousness of his surroundings. His attention wandered. The happy stillness of the morning swept over him. He sat for a long time, rocking gently from side to side. Suddenly he grew aware of a sound which seemed to be made by someone climbing hurriedly up a many-runged ladder. Karasyuk started and raised his head.

A hedgehog crept out into the clearing from behind a pine tree on his right. It burrowed among the dry pine needles, looked round with small, mouse-like eyes and stood still. The small eyes glittered in fear, and the spines rose on its body. For a few moments the two stared at each other. Cold shivers ran down Karasyuk's spine. Then the hedgehog twitched its small, greyish-blue nose, described a small circle in the clearing, and moved resolutely towards the fallen pine tree.

"Perhaps I'm sitting on its house," Karasyuk thought, with a smile, but he did not move from his place.

The little hedgehog came up quite close to him, knocked its snout against the broad toe of Karasyuk's boot, and immediately rolled itself into a small prickly ball.

"Hallo, little brother," Karasyuk said.

He sat a long time on the tree, teasing the animal with a green branch, and his thoughts wandered back to the past. It seemed to rise from a great distance and was as incomprehensible to Karasyuk as the whispering in the wood, or as this small, but prickly, hedgehog. . . . Indeed, to some extent he understood the hedgehog. . . . For a moment he saw himself in it, his wild loneliness, and the thought made him tease the animal more vigorously, almost in anger. Then the green branch dropped from his hand, and its green leaves sheltered the hedgehog from the rays of the morning sun. . . .

Before Karasyuk's eyes rose clearly the picture of the battle of Uralsk. At that time he was a Communist, leading a small company of partisans,[1] who had followed him from Guriev, fighting their way over sandy wastes and through many bloody encounters. With his company he had frequently attacked the rear of the White armies, flying over the steppes like a horse that has broken free from its fetters. . . . But later, when the order arrived from the capital to disband the partisan companies and to organise a regular army, Karasyuk was requested to place his company and himself at the disposal of Grigoriev, formerly a colonel in the Tsarist army. Karasyuk was furious.

"It's treachery," he said.

Actually, he remembered, he had not said the words. The thought had come to him only later. At the time he had simply dashed off in a mad rage and together with Emelka Bondarchuk had hurriedly collected a new company and attacked the steppe town of Ersh, laid it waste and organised a council of three, consisting of himself, Emelka and the Tatar Akhmetka.

Perhaps it was the right thing to do, and perhaps . . . Karasyuk did not know. He tried to suppress all his thoughts on the subject, as a carpenter stops up the holes in his wood.

Soon rumours of the "liberator" Karasyuk spread over the steppes. Representatives came to him from the villages and small towns. The company grew in numbers. The peasants welcomed him with the cross and with bread.

This happened the first time that he came to a village. When, for the second time, the peasants learned that he was approaching they drove their horses and cattle out of the

[1] Irregular Soviet troops.

village and locked up the young women and girls. If he came a third time the villagers attacked Karasyuk's men and treated them savagely, throwing them into the rivers and ponds, or leaving them senseless on the high road. . . . Karasyuk's company melted away. It had numbered three thousand, and after five months only fifteen hundred remained, and at last, before his very eyes, the inhabitants of the village of Khvorostianka deprived him of his baggage containing sugar and ammunition.

That was the beginning. . . .

The same evening Karasyuk attacked the village, put to death everyone on whom he could lay hands, and in the blaze of the fire that soon consumed Khvorostianka galloped off into the steppes, where the same story was repeated. Then, with his company of a thousand swords, Karasyuk crossed the Volga, devastated the town of Ilim and retreated to the Bear's Hole. . . .

The night of the retreat from Ilim he had lost a large part of his company, and he realised that, with only his handful of men, he could be surrounded in this hilly part of the Volga district and wiped out. Karasyuk was well aware of this, but another thought filled his mind and left him no peace: at any cost, whether alone or with the best of his men, he must reach Tambovia, where Antonov had been carrying on his operations for about two years. With this object in view he had sent Emelka Bondarchuk that morning to reconnoitre in the district of Alai and beyond, towards Tambovia. . . .

Cautiously the hedgehog unrolled itself, stared at its surroundings from under the leafy branch, and tripped hurriedly down the slope. The noise startled Karasyuk from his reverie. He shuddered and stared at the bottom of the valley through the slender trunks of the pine trees.

A horseman dashed out of the trees, his animal covered in a lather of sweat, and galloped through the valley, shouting in a ringing voice:

"Hi! Brothers! Those swines. . . . The Communists in Shirokoye have killed Emelka and Sebastian!"

The horseman's cry shattered the sleepiness of the valley. Kalmuks, Tatars, Russians, Ukrainians with long moustaches sprang from the tents and huts. The valley resounded with their shouts, with the clanging of iron and the neighing of the horses.

The news stirred Karasyuk to violent action. He was filled

with an evil fury; from between clenched teeth, he rained terrible curses on Shirokoye. Having taken his seat on his handsome brown horse, he drew out his sword and cried:

"Follow me! . . . Forward! The village is yours! . . ."

Spurring on his horse, Karasyuk stormed towards Shirokoye.

A moment later the company streamed out of the valley, following their commander.

3

The sun chased the lumps of snow in the ditches into the streams. The streams swelled, washing the roots of the willows and wild cherry trees and ran noisily into the Volga, carrying along with them pieces of heavy red clay. . . . The Volga roared in the breaking of the ice.

The peasants of Burdiashka street gathered at Shlenka's hut as though at a well-spread table. The first to arrive was the cobbler Petka Kudeyarov. Shouting shrilly, he pointed to Davidka Panov's hut:

"Davidka. Bring Davidka out! He's turned against the people. . . . If he doesn't come out himself we'll throw him into the Alai. . . ."

Mitka Spirin rapped angrily on the window of Panov's hut.

"Come out," he cried, "or else they'll drag you out."

"I'm not coming out," Davidka retorted from within the hut. "You tell them that. Just look at them! They've got tired of a peaceful life, so they start all these rows. Do you think the Government's sillier than you? Oh yes! I don't think. As for you—you're also in the fellowship—and now you're also standing on your head."

Mitka ran from the window to the hill behind the hut, and shouted to the people:

"He says he's not coming. He says you're all against the Government, and you're all upside down—have you ever heard anything like it?"

"Let him go to the devil," Pchelkin answered. "We can manage on our own."

Suddenly, as if by chance, Plakushchev appeared from behind the hill. When he came up to the peasants he took off his cap and made a low bow.

"What's the meeting about? To watch the Alai?"

"Well, you see, Ilya Maximovich, the grain . . . we're going to divide it. . . ."

"What grain?"

"In the barn."

"Hasn't it been taken away yet?"

"No," Petka Kudeyarov growled. "They haven't had the time yet."

"I say, you, listen." Shlenka came up close to Plakushchev. "You were the village elder. You know all the laws . . . and the Soviet laws. . . . What shall we do?"

Plakushchev shuffled one foot among the dry leaves. . . . "Well, what shall I say? The people's Government——" he began.

All were silent, staring at Plakushchev. Plakushchev was examining the toe of his boot; then he raised his head. The spring wind ruffled his long, soft beard, which looked like the tail of a Persian cat, and blew it over his shoulder.

"And so the people have power, and so the people can do what they want . . . the people. I think so . . . according to the laws of the Soviets. . . ."

"That's right," Shlenka added. "What the people wants must be. . . . What else did they pour their blood out for?"

"Sure."

"That's right."

"It's our grain after all."

"Wait a minute, wait a minute." Kudeyarov's voice rose above the shouts of the others. "This means that the whole flock . . . the leader . . . must follow the leader. In one word"—he sawed the air with his left arm—"we must all go, and we'll take Davidka along with us."

Dragging Panov in their midst the peasants crossed the bridge and marched towards Fedunov's hut. . . .

As soon as he reached his own hut, Plakushchev slipped from the crowd, as a fish slips from weak hands, and, unnoticed by the others, ran into his yard. At the door of the hut he met his daughter Zinka and pulled her affectionately by the ear as if she had been a young foal. Then he entered the hut and sat down on the bench, staring out of the window.

"Well, so it's started," he thought, and leaned closer to the window, his beard touching the frame. "And things are stirring over there, too," he added aloud, watching the peasants running from hut to hut on the opposite slope of the Krapivny valley. "Who's this coming along?" He wiped

the pane of glass that had been dimmed by his breath. "Who can it be?"

Slipping and stumbling down the clayey path, Zakhar Kataev ran towards Krivaya street.

"Oh, you hound!" Ilya Maximovich hurled at him through the window. "He's going to stop the business again."

He rose from the bench and hastily put on his cap. Then he took it off and sat down again by the window.

"Shall I go and have a fight with him? I could, but what would happen after that?" he thought, and remained at the window.

4

Hurriedly Fedunov harnessed his horse while Grandfather Maxim ran into the barn for some straw. Immediately after Ognev and his six companions had gone off to Alai, he had decided to send Dasha and the Grandfather there, to stay with an aunt.

The clamour of the peasants drew Fedunov from the shed. He ran into the hut and looked through the window. He saw the peasants of Krivaya street join the first group; then all together they moved on like a broad stream towards him.

"No, I won't give in to these people." He ran to the door. "They won't get me."

"Mitya!" Dasha cried, raising herself slightly in the bunk. The heaviness of her body in these last days of her pregnancy made her fall back. "Mitya!"

Fedunov hesitated. Dasha clutched at his back with all her strength.

"Give it to them, give it to them. Give them the key—it isn't your grain."

"Let me go. Let me go, I say. . . ."

"I won't have your death on my head. They'll get it all the same—you can't hide yourself."

Grandfather Maxim ran in from the barn. He shouted to Fedunov from the door and came towards him with outstretched hands.

"Run away, my son, run away. The boat is among the bushes—hide in the reeds."

The howling of the crowd was now quite near.

"Hang him on the tree! Hang him on the aspen in the valley."

"Hi, you fine warrior, come out! Come out and give us a speech and tell us all about it."

"Let me go—ah!" He pushed Dasha aside. Her head struck the corner of the stove and she groaned quietly. She lay on her right side, then rolled slowly and painfully on to her back and drew up her feet. . . . Fedunov's eyes fell on the bigness of her stomach, and under her thin dress something living seemed to stir and move across the swelling of her body.

Fedunov's face took on a bluish tinge.

"Dasha . . . Dashenka. . . ."

Dasha opened her eyes. They were warm and tender, and moist with tears.

"I'll get up in a minute, Mitya—just a minute, I'll get up. . . ."

"A-ah! Break it in."

The window pane crashed into the room, and a splinter of glass stuck quivering into the wall like a knife.

"Run away, run." Grandfather Maxim pushed Fedunov and dragged Dasha along with him, protecting her big stomach with his own body.

The peasants filled the yard, looking like shocks of corn blackened by rain. When Fedunov appeared the noise ceased, and the crowd drew back slightly. Fedunov felt oppressed by a terrible burden. His eyes ran quickly over the sea of faces and rested on that of Davidka Panov.

"So he's here, too, although he joined the fellowship. . . ." This thought was immediately followed by another. "That means I should have given in a long time ago. . . . It isn't worth trying to fight against this muddle. . . ."

Involuntarily he put his hand in his pocket and felt there the big key of the barn. He turned it over in his hand; the movement made the pocket bulge. It was enough to stir the crowd from its momentary hesitation.

"Ah! So you're going to shoot," Pchelkin cried. "Go for him."

He was the first to throw himself against the wattled fence. Under the rough hands of the crowd the fence fell to pieces in a few moments, as though it was made of thin lace. Only the oaken posts remained standing.

"Citizens! Comrades! Brothers!" Fedunov shouted. "Brothers, brothers. . . ." The first post whistled over his head and struck the wall of the passage, cut through it and

clattered among some iron buckets in the room beyond. . . . At the second blow Fedunov felt that his chest had burst; he reeled and tried not to fall down the steps at the peasants' feet, then he crumpled up at the door. Resting his right hand on the passage floor he felt that, quite independently of his will, something soft and slimy rose from his throat, like a frog; his lips opened and a clot of blood fell from his mouth. Then more frogs followed the first; they came faster. He tried to rise, but somebody crashed something on his head from above . . . his eyes closed and Fedunov sank into a deep, dark well. . . . A broad back towered over him, and two hairy arms stretched out. . . .

"What are you doing? What are you doing, you sons of bitches!" Zakhar Kataev thundered, running up the steps. "Is he a dog, or a human being, eh?"

"It's Pchelkin, it's all his fault, the madman," shouted Yashka Chukhliav, dashing through the gate into the yard. "I saw him yesterday."

The crowd stood silent. Only Davidka Panov called out from behind the barn: "You ought to pull down his breeches and give it to him, the damned little ragamuffin."

Pchelkin grasped the post which Petka Kudeyarov held, swung it over his head, and made for Kataev.

"Don't you touch Zakhar! Don't you dare touch Uncle Zakhar," Yashka shouted and put two brawny fists close up to Pchelkin's face.

Pchelkin ducked and dropped the post.

"Well?" Zakhar's drawling voice broke the silence. "Did you see him? Who is it that you follow? He wanted to make an end of me, and then he'll make an end of you and you and you," he pointed to one peasant after another. "He'll do you all in, and then what next? Things will be easy for him after that."

"Zakhar." Fedunov's voice could scarcely be heard; he held out the key of the barn to Zakhar.

Zakhar turned, grasped the sick man under the arms and half dragged, half carried him to the barn and opened the door. . . .

Behind the fruit garden ran the river Alai, reddened by the sun and by clay, and behind the river rose tall, thick reeds.

5

Two horses trotted over the reddish corn near the threshing ground at the edge of the village. One of them carried Emelka Bondarchuk, whose feet were fastened firmly in the stirrups. The other rider had fallen from his horse in the Krivaya street, face forward in the mud.

Karasyuk reached the horses first. He dismounted hurriedly, gently lifted Emelka off the horse and laid him down carefully on the ground. Then he took off his hat and stood motionless for a few minutes.

The furrow in his forehead grew deeper. He did not notice that his men had joined him. Stretching out their necks, they stared now at him, now at the dead Emelka.

Emelka had received the bullet in his face. It had broken the bridge of the nose and part of the forehead. The stained and rotted teeth were clenched.

"Master," Akhmetka said, breaking the silence.

A faint shudder ran through Karasyuk's body. He raised his head and answered quietly:

"Friend."

He bit his lip and sprang into the saddle. A low sound ran from rider to rider. Talking to each other in lively fashion, they took aim at the village huts and waited, like a pack of hounds, for the signal from Karasyuk.

"Forward!" Karasyuk shouted, rising slightly in the stirrups. "To the square!"

The mud splashed in all directions. Yelling loudly, the men stormed into the peasant huts. The chickens ran screaming over the yards, fluttering over the fences and straw roofs of the sheds. The dogs howled under the blows of the rifles. Stepan Ognev's gate opened with a loud creak and sheep ran wildly across the road, wagging their tails.

Following the sheep, two of Karasyuk's men pushed Grandfather Khariton out of the gate and into the street. Grey-haired, hatless, wringing his hands and screaming, the old man tried to resist. One of the bandits—a man with long red moustaches—brought his rifle down brutally on the bare head. The old man stumbled and fell against the wall of the hut; then, with a thin groan, he slipped into a muddy puddle, his arms outstretched.

"There, you old dog," one of the two said, and kicked the fallen man. Grandfather Khariton's linen shirt showed the

impression of the muddy boot. And tiny streams of water, like snakes, ran from the puddle into the holes of the ground.

"He's done for," said the other, stepping over the motionless body.

"Is he? Well, let's get on to the next."

The din in the street reached Fedunov's yard. Pchelkin ran towards the barn, then into the kitchen-garden; he wanted to find Zakhar, but suddenly changed his mind and ran back to the gate. At the corner of the hut he slipped on some frozen manure, regained his balance for a moment, and then fell. He heard Yashka Chukhliav's laughter in the barn; it infuriated him.

"You swine," Pchelkin muttered. He drew the list of open and secret Communists from his pocket and, turning aside for a moment, hastily scribbled something on the paper.

A group of bandits dashed into the yard, flung Pchelkin first out of the gate and pushed the rest of the peasants into the street with their rifles.

The whole village echoed to the creaking of gates, the shouts of the invaders and the cries of women. . . . Polkan, Plakushchev's dog, had torn itself free of the chain and buried its teeth in the leg of a passing bandit. The man drew his sword and slashed at the beast's widely opened jaws. . . .

In the market square the inhabitants of Shirokoye were lined up three deep in front of Karasyuk. A secret whisper ran from mouth to mouth.

"They've killed Khariton. . . . He's lying over there."

A little way off, Khariton Ognev lay like a sack of flour in the puddle. Close by Plakushchev's dog, writhing convulsively, splashed mud over the old man's dead body.

"Old men to the front," Karasyuk cried.

The ranks opened quickly under the blows of rifles, and soon the front row displayed a line of beards. At one end stood Semyon Peshkov; next to him Nikita Gurianov, then Plakushchev and Shlenka, all bearded. . . . The men in the second row were younger. Pchelkin stood behind Plakushchev and in front of Yashka Chukhliav. At his side was Davidka Panov. With Yashka in the third row were the young men, married the previous autumn. Yegor Stepanovich was nowhere to be seen.

"Just see," Pchelkin thought. "He got out of this as well —the scoundrel. How can I hand over the list? Ilya

Maximovich said it must be done secretly. But how can I do it secretly?"

Yashka Chukhliav glanced at the reddish head in front of him and grinned as he remembered how, when he was looking for Steshka the previous evening, he had encountered Pchelkin and thrown him into the puddle.

"I must have hurt him nicely, the madman," Yashka thought, and stared over the bent backs of the men in front of him at Karasyuk, a firm, pitiless figure. Then his eyes turned to Stepan Ognev's hut. He fancied that he caught a glimpse of Steshka's grey dress through the open door. Yashka straightened himself and his face shone with pride; here he stood, together with all the other men, in front of Karasyuk and see—there was nobody, nobody who stood more firmly on his feet than he did. He felt a passionate desire that Steshka might see him now, if only for a moment; then she would not call him an idiot any more. He was not a weakling: he looked fear straight in the eyes.

"Ready, chief," Akhmetka cried, breaking the thread of Yashka's thoughts.

"I see," Karasyuk boomed.

"Me,—little, little," Akhmetka murmured, and ran across the street.

Plakushchev watched him, kicking up the mud as he ran; he pushed open Plakushchev's gate, and a moment later Zinka's frightened shriek rang across the market-place. . . . Her head flashed by the window, followed by Akhmetka's outstretched arms. Plakushchev's chin quivered, his grey beard sank lower on his broad chest, and muddy tears fell from his eyes.

"Lord, Lord," he whispered.

Karasyuk dismounted. Twice he walked up and down the peasant ranks. In breathless silence they tore their eyes from Plakushchev's window and, like disciplined soldiers, followed Karasyuk's every step. When he stopped at Bondarchuk's corpse, the peasants drew back slightly and slowly bent their heads.

"Well!" Cold shivers ran down their backs at the sound of his voice. "I wouldn't have dragged you all here if your Communists hadn't killed my friend. . . . Now you must answer for it. Which of you is related to Communists?"

Pchelkin flashed a glance at Plakushchev. Ilya Maximo-

vich was standing as if at the open grave of his father, his back quite bowed.

The peasants were silent, trying to avoid Karasyuk's penetrating eyes. Even Yashka could not withstand that look and lowered his eyes to the heels of Petka Kudeyarov's boots. Petka, his hands clasped under his apron, shuffled his feet and threw terrified glances at the peasants around him. Only Shlenka, throwing open his tattered jacket and exposing, through the torn shirt, a part of his fat stomach, looked straight at Karasyuk, and seemed to be saying:

"All this doesn't matter to me. I've got nothing to do with this business, and you can't make me responsible for it. . . . But if you do start asking me questions, I'll tell you such a story as you won't be able to make head or tail of it."

"Well, what about you?" Karasyuk pointed to Kudeyarov.

"Me?" Petka started back as if a white-hot iron had been thrust close to his face. "Me? What about me? Everybody knows I'm always at my bench. . . . I'm a cobbler. I'm . . . besides, I'm not quite right in the head. . . ."

"He really is a fool," Peshkov said quietly, but in all seriousness.

Again there was silence. The sun burnt ardently. . . . The streams murmured down the slopes of the Krapivny valley, the Volga played noisily with the ice, the horses' hoofs trampled in the mud and a cock crowed loudly somewhere in the village. . . . They listened to the sounds of spring. Karasyuk turned away for a moment; for a moment, childish joy gleamed in his eyes, leaving them cold and gloomy again.

"Not quite right?" He turned to Peshkov. "But you're all right—well, you speak."

Peshkov screwed up his eyes.

"Well, Your Eminence—I don't quite know how to address you; everything is upside down these days; you call one man 'comrade,' and he boxes your ears, and you call another man 'sir,' and he goes for you as well . . . it's all topsy-turvy. . . ."

"You may call me what you like; I know none of you love me particularly," Karasyuk answered with a smile.

The peasants sighed with audible relief at the smile; Kudeyarov grimaced and emitted a squeak.

"So," Peshkov continued, "you can't tell who's a Communist and who isn't. Some man came from the town a little

while ago, he took two jugs of milk from my wife, said 'thank you,' and that's all. . . . Does that mean he was a Communist? And over there your Tatar's taking things from Plakushchev's house—is he a Communist as well?"

Karasyuk frowned. Fragments of muttered sentences reached him from the other peasants.

"It's very hard to tell. . . ."

"You want an educated man to make things clear. . . ."

"Yes." Peshkov waved his companions into silence. "And again; suppose you went away, and your father had to answer for it . . . he gets a good beating for it, doesn't he?"

Karasyuk shuddered. Confused pictures flashed in front of his eyes—the sea, the village by the seashore, his old father and the hedgehog in the pine trees. For a moment he thought of throwing up everything, of standing before the peasants and saying: "Take me, and do with me what you will. You can harness me to the plough for five years, for ten years—only not there, don't send me to them to be shot." Then the actual present returned. He remembered the attack on Ilim and Emelka's death, and the rage that boiled in him drew every vestige of blood from his face. He drew out his revolver and shouted hoarsely:

"I'm asking you: Who is a Communist? And you tell me fairy-tales. Speak out. I'll count up to three."

"Ah, so this is what you mean with your people's Government," Peshkov cried. "You treat old men like dogs, you drag them into the street and threaten them with guns. But you won't frighten me—we've lived through worse things than this. And we'll remember you. . . . We used to have a prince here. . . ."

At these words the peasants of Shirokoye straightened their backs, and hundreds of eyes, filled with hate, glared at Karasyuk and his company.

"Speak up," Karasyuk shouted, pointing the revolver at Peshkov. "Speak up. I'll count up to three. One." He took a step back. "Two."

Semyon (his wife had often said: "You're hot-headed, you're much too hot-headed") stepped from his place and waved his arms.

"What do you think I am?—a cow's tail? Do you think you can frighten me, you chicken?"

The rest seemed to the peasants to happen with incredible swiftness. Peshkov threw himself on Karasyuk and fell with

his face in the mud. Karasyuk's bullet had shattered his skull. With his free hand the bandit chief struck Nikita Gurianov in the chest. Terrified, Gurianov bent his knees and fell back on to the men behind. Karasyuk seized Plakushchev's long beard and, as the old man fell weakly at the feet of Karasyuk's horse, a handful of grey hair from his beard fluttered through the air.

"Ah, you swine," Karasyuk roared. "Blast you all. I'll show you, I'll show you. I'll——"

The butt-end of his revolver thudded dully on the heads of the peasants.

Pchelkin had been trying to get near him in order to hand over the list, but when he saw the tuft of grey beard fall to the ground, his knees gave way and, involuntarily, he turned his head away. Through the opening made by a lane he saw the river Alai, about fifty yards away, muddy and turbulent, and on its farther bank cool, slender reeds bathed in sunlight. . . . He even fancied that he saw a small boat containing Zakhar and Fedunov slip out of the reeds and quickly vanish again.

The peasants screamed under those ruthless blows, and one by one they fell at Karasyuk's feet.

"You swine! Ali!" Karasyuk called to the Kalmuk, "Ali. Lift them up!"

The Kalmuk Ali was standing not far from Pchelkin. About fifty yards behind him flowed the river, and on the other bank those dense, untouched reeds. Once among the reeds nobody could find you, not even with a gun. . . . Pchelkin moved uneasily from foot to foot, like a fettered horse. When Ali left his post to obey Karasyuk's command, he stepped aside quietly and then ran for all he was worth down the lane to the bank of the river.

"Hi, you!" Ali shouted, and fell on one knee.

The bullet whistled past him and fell into the muddy water. A second shot followed, then a third. "Catch him!" Karasyuk shouted. Pchelkin reached the river. He wanted to jump, but the sight of the foaming, rushing water held him to the bank. He heard voices close behind him. Then two or three bullets again whistled over his head. Pchelkin dashed back from the bank, jumped over a fence, clambered across the boggy mud of a steep pasture-field and along a narrow, grassy path towards the kitchen-gardens. Slipping behind the broad, dry leaves of the marrows which grew

by the garden fence, he crouched down and listened, motionless.

The bushes rustled, the willow trees moved; two Kalmuks appeared. Their slanting eyes searched the river and the vegetable-gardens. They stood there for a few minutes. . . . Pchelkin shut his eyes tightly. When he opened them again he saw two figures walking away from him.

"No-o! It's like being on hot coals here. I'd better go to Yegor Stepanovich. He wasn't there; that means he's sitting at home. I'll ask him to hide me . . . he's a cunning fellow."

He ran to Chukhliav's barn and knocked the gate open with his shoulder without pausing to look round. Three of Karasyuk's men were dragging Chukhliav across the yard.

"Oh!" Pchelkin could not control the exclamation. He ducked and ran back to the garden, bent double. In the middle of the garden he stopped dead; the two Kalmuks were standing by the river-bank. One of them shouted "Hi!" at the sight of Pchelkin.

The cry cut over Pchelkin's ears like a whip. He jumped; then, expecting a shot, bent low over the ground and dashed to the fence. Behind the fence rose the high, shaggy hats of the bandits; the muzzles of several rifles stared menacingly into his mouth. Pchelkin turned. Over the opposite fence loomed the same terrible hats and rifles.

"I'm cut off," he thought. The words hammered in his head, and bitter tears gathered in his throat and seemed to choke him. There was a queer, rumbling noise in his chest. he felt a burning desire to run to the pasture-field, to roll and bury himself in the mud and manure, or to be transformed into a ragged tramp sitting by the roadside, so that he might stare in indifferent surprise at those hats and rifles.

"Then I'd have nothing to answer for, nothing at all. . . . And now? . . ."

Awaiting a shot, he shrank together and imagined himself, pierced all over with bullets, falling into the mud like a dead bird and then . . . that would be the end of everything, everything; of himself, Pchelkin, and of his new shiny boots. . . . Of course, they would take off the boots, and take the list from his pocket, and then they would put an end to the Communists without him. . . . Ilya Plakushchev alone would get any benefit out of it all, and he would give other people money for a new pair of boots, or lend them a pud

of flour and treat them to spirits, but not him . . . not Pchelkin.

But there was no shot. The Kalmuk Ali stepped out of the bushes, showing his teeth in laughter.

"Hi! Give, give."

"What a fool I am," Pchelkin thought. "They want the list. That's why they don't shoot me. I'm a fool."

He put his hand in his pocket. It was torn, and he could not find the list. Angrily he searched the pocket and walked up to Ali. Irresolutely he tried to make up his mind. "If I give it to them, I'll be sorry afterwards. Everybody will say: you scoundrel, look how many people you've sent to death." And then: "But I didn't give it to them myself, not myself . . . they all saw it was taken by force. . . . Besides, which man will willingly let his neck be twisted?"

He hurried towards Ali. Suddenly the Kalmuk sprang on to the fence and threw himself bodily on Pchelkin. Something big blotted out the blue of the sky. He felt a heavy blow on the neck, and sank on his knees into the soft earth. Powerful arms imprisoned him; he seemed to be floating over the ground. . . . There was a loud, grinding noise, as if from a mill-wheel. Then the noise died away. He saw the people of the village, and Karasyuk himself. Somebody shouted.

"The chairman, chief."

"Good! . . . Ah!"

"So they've caught Fedunov . . . Fedunov," Pchelkin thought confusedly.

Ali jammed the rifle into Pchelkin's back. His spine creaked, and icy shudders ran down his body. Then his body seemed to swim away, his eyes were covered with a mist and Pchelkin felt that he had only a head left, not a whole head, but just his forehead, something that lived, something moving and bright.

"Good, chief, very good, chief," Ali said again, examining Pchelkin. "Very—good!"

Karasyuk ran up to Pchelkin, and put his revolver against the other's mouth.

"Speak up, you son of a bitch."

Pchelkin turned his face away from the cold touch of the steel and stepped back.

"Akhmetka," Karasyuk cried.

Akhmetka, heavily laden with spoils from Plakushchev's

hut, ran out of the yard, and threw down the bundles he was carrying. He shook his fist angrily at the people of Shirokoye.

"Akhmetka, do your work!"

Somebody in the crowd broke into quiet, restrained sobs.

"All right, you just go on crying . . . just you try," Karasyuk muttered between clenched teeth. Flourishing his revolver, he sprang into the saddle. "To your rifles!"

The catches of the rifles clicked round him. The peasants drew closer together, each trying to get into the middle. They stared at Karasyuk.

Akhmetka came out of Gurianov's yard, leading a well-fed, short-legged horse. Ali lifted Pchelkin by the armpits and dragged him to the horse; the shiny boots traced two furrows through the mud. Pchelkin's eyes seemed to start out of their sockets; he stood as if turned to stone. When Ali slipped a noose round his second leg, he buried his face in his hands. He could see the tail of the horse, and from the tail two ropes stretched to his feet. He tried to jump back and shrieked wildly, piercingly. The horse started at the shout, throwing him off his feet, and amid the cheers and laughter of Karasyuk's men, and the low moaning of the peasants, the animal galloped down the street. Convulsed and jerking, his face to the ground, Pchelkin's body cut a deep path through the thick mud.

The yellow jacket and shirt slipped from his shoulders, the blood ran from the wounds in his back, trickling through the mud, and his torn and bloody muscles, visible through the lacerated flesh, twitched horribly.

"Oh, he's alive! He's still alive!" a woman shrieked.

The horse crossed the street and turned into a lane. At the corner Pchelkin was dashed against a heap of oak logs. The body turned over in the air and fell like a boneless lump of meat into a puddle.

A savage roar burst from a hundred throats, frightening Karasyuk's horse. The bandit chief, lashing his horse into a state of fury, dashed forward. The peasants scattered in all directions, followed by the bandits, dealing blows right and left with their rifles. At the corner of Plakushchev's hut, Akhmetka, searching Pchelkin's pockets, found a greasy, muddy scrap of paper.

"Chief," he shouted, and ran up to Karasyuk.

Karasyuk snatched the paper from his hand and looked at it attentively. At the top were three letters: Com.

"Impossible." Karasyuk was dumbfounded. "Akhmetka!"

A cannon shot thundered from the direction of Alai. The shell passed over the village, glittering in the sun like a seagull in flight, and fell into the Volga, sending up a huge fountain of water. The second shell caught the fire-station and shattered it to splinters. In the distance, about two *versts* from Shirokoye, appeared a squadron of cavalry.

"Akhmetka," Karasyuk shouted with all the force at his command. "Take everything with——"

His last words were drowned in the general uproar.

The mud spurted high along the streets. Karasyuk's company disappeared quickly from the village. At the cross roads leading to Alai and Nikolskoye, Karasyuk called a halt. Then he took the road to the left, leading to Nikolskoye.

Ilya Plakushchev rose from the ground. Touching his face where the handful of hair had been torn away, he walked uncertainly towards his hut. Zinka ran to meet him. She drew back at the sight of his pale face, and his hair which had turned white.

6

Akhmetka dragged the boots from Pchelkin's feet, tied them together with the bundles of Plakushchev's clothes to his horse, and rode towards Yegor Stepanovich Chukhliav's house.

Yegor Stepanovich sat by the barn, his long, thin hands clasped over his stomach. He was writhing in pain. Since the arrival of Karasyuk's company he had had to retreat several times behind the stables.

"I expect my belly's made that way," he grumbled. "As soon as I get among people I can't keep away from the place."

When Akhmetka appeared at the gate, Chukhliav grew pale; then he smiled, pointing to his stomach, and said:

"Oh, oh! Got a pain, my friend."

Akhmetka grinned and wrinkled his slanting eyes.

"You Jecob?"

Chukhliav ran behind the stable. Sitting down, he thought: "What the devil does he want?"

Another shell flew over the village, so low that it seemed it must tear the roofs off the huts. It burst in Pyriakin's

hemp-field and through the crack of the door Yegor Stepanovich saw the damp earth spurt up, and a piece of shrapnel hissed into a puddle. He trembled, but Akhmetka knocked his rifle impatiently against the wheel of the cart in the yard and shouted:

"Hi! Hi! Musn't talk—no talk. Give me, Jecob. Give me, Jecob."

Yashka came to the door, pale and untidy.

"What do you want?"

"Have you horse? Horse?"

In his haste, Yegor Stepanovich tore a button off his trousers. He grew angry, fingered the button helplessly for a moment, then knotted the two ends together and ran excitedly to Akhmetka.

"What horse have we got? We haven't got a horse—it's an old bag of bones. Not good enough for dog's meat. Come and have a look at it yourself."

The three of them went to the stable.

"Oh, oh!" Akhmetka shook his head, contemplating the horse. "Why like that, eh? Me had one like that. Soldier take away. . . . Red soldier take away. My horse one eye, other eye bad eye, oh, oh, very bad eye."

"No, no, my friend. Do you think we made the horse like this on purpose? That's silly. No man's an enemy to himself. Something's happened to the beast since last autumn."

Yegor Stepanovich began to tell a long and doleful story of his horse's sickness. Akhmetka did not listen. He went out of the stable and walked into the shed.

"Listen," Yashka whispered quietly, poining to an axe in the corner of the yard, ". . . with the axe."

"What do you mean? What do you mean?" Yegor Stepanovich trembled and scratched his ear with long, dirty nails. "We'll have to think of some other way."

"Which—other way? That'll settle it . . . we'll throw him in the Alai."

"No, no," Yegor Stepanovich waved the suggestion aside. "You run indoors. Behind the stove there's two bottles of the best. Bring them here. Well, friend." He ran towards Akhmetka. "Oh no, you can't have that horse. It's not ours. It doesn't belong to us."

Akhmetka was leading a brown mare out of the shed. The animal reared, laid her ears flat against her head and ran round the yard.

"Oh, what a devil," said Yegor Stepanovich. "And she bites, too—something dreadful."

"Good, good," Akhmetka squealed. "Give me, Jecob! Give me."

"Jecob will come in a minute. He's gone to get something." Chukhliav pointed to his throat and put an arm around Akhmetka's shoulders. "Come along with me, brother."

Yashka ran out of the house with the two bottles. Pointing to them, Yegor Stepanovich drew Akhmetka indoors.

"Come along, brother, you shall be our guest. I like men of your sort. They may have a different religion, but it's all the same God. Come along."

Akhmetka stopped, showing his teeth. Then he reached out for a bottle and drank it to the bottom in one breath.

"He's got a good thirst, the swine," Chukhliav thought.

"Huh! Nice!" Akhmetka smacked his lips and vigorously scratched his left cheek. "Give me horse, Jecob. Give me horse. Give it to chief Karasyuk. Or me cut your throat."

Yegor Stepanovich turned angrily to Yashka.

"You swine, you devil," he hissed. "What have you done? It's all your fault. And now the horse. Oh, my God!" He turned to Akhmetka: "But it's not our horse, brother. It's not ours."

At the reproach the blood rushed to Yashka's face. His lips trembled.

"It's you, it's all your fault," his father said again. "Other people have to suffer through you."

"I'll get the horse back. I may die myself, but you'll have the horse back."

Yashka ran to the horse, swung himself into the saddle and called to Akhmetka:

"Come along, you pock-marked cripple."

"Yashka! Where are you going? Where are you going?"

Yegor Stepanovich had barely reached the gate when he saw the two riders disappear at the bend of the street.

The home-made spirits soon rose to Akhmetka's head. His flat nose seemed to get flatter, to merge into his pock-marked face. His eyes narrowed until they were no more than two gleaming slits.

"Karasyuk good good chief," he murmured. "My Karasyuk. Akhmetka . . . take Akhmetka . . . little, little, Karasyuk . . . ah, ah!"

When they had passed the threshing-ground and came out into the open fields, Akhmetka turned and, having arranged Pchelkin's boots more comfortably on his back, stretched out a crumpled sheet of paper to his companion. Yashka took the paper and stared for a long time at the scarcely legible words, covered with dirt. He could see only one thing; his own name—Yashka Chukhliav. The blood rushed to his face and the paper trembled in his hand.

"He put me among the Communists. Was it Pchelkin? Of course it was, the madman. He's broken his own neck and he wants others. . . . I'd better hide it; perhaps the old baldhead will forget about it. And then, if there's no list, what have I got to worry about?"

"Give it, Jecob, give." Akhmetka stretched out a hand for the paper. "Give horse, give paper, give money. Give money. Akhmetka treat himself, girls and friends. Why you no answer? Lost your tongue?" He looked sideways at Yashka, grinned and swayed in the saddle, almost losing his balance.

Yashka had made up his mind. "I'll kill him—it's easy enough to get rid of a drunken man."

"Well, brother, will you take the horse? Take it, and go to the devil. But I haven't got any money. Where should I have money from?"

"From stingy man, stingy man. Make horse bad."

"Yes, he's made of iron. They call him the iron man in the village," Yashka agreed. "Me and you friends," he went on, trying to imitate the Tatar's broken speech. "Me and you cut throat of all Communists."

"Communists?" Akhmetka was startled. "Is there Communists?"

"Of course there are . . . lots of them, over there." Yashka pointed to the distant village of Alai.

They rode down a hill, past open fields. The road was boggy, and as they guided their horses on to firmer ground Yashka slipped over to Akhmetka's right-hand side.

"Look at all the things he's pinched," Yashka thought, glancing at the bundles on the other's horse. "And they're Pchelkin's boots, I think. Yes, they are."

Taking the reins in his right hand, his eyes fixed on the broad, sleepy back of Akhmetka, he pressed his knee into the left flank of his horse and stretched out the other hand to Akhmetka's sword. At that moment the mare stepped

into a hole in the road, lurched sideways and stumbled against Akhmetka's horse.

"Foo! You devil."

The Tatar was wide awake. Turning his head, he closed his eyes cunningly and, apparently aware of Yashka's intention, grasped the handle of his sword; moving in the saddle so that he might keep the other in sight, he shouted:

"Give, Jecob, give. First give."

Angrily, Yashka rode on ahead. Akhmetka laid the sword across his knees and measured the distance between himself and the other. Yashka felt Akhmetka's movements. Little bumps seemed to form on his back and then run down his spine.

To the left rose the dome of the Nikolskoye village church, in front yawned the Bear's Hole; to the right ran the road to Podnessloye, winding round the Dolliny valley.

Yashka had heard that Karasyuk's company was stationed at the Bear's Hole.

"So that's where he's trying to take me. I'll have to lead him into the forest, and there . . . we'll see. A man can only die once, and I've got good fists. . . ."

He turned his head. Akhmetka was dozing again. Greenish saliva was trickling down his thin beard.

"He's well soaked. . . . Father must have put some chicken droppings into the stuff to make it stronger. He's not quite straight in the saddle."

He turned his horse quietly and guided her towards the Dolliny valley. . . . For a few minutes his heart beat wildly and his knees cut into the animals' flanks like claws.

He turned into the path that led past the Nikolskoye mill-pond. Beyond the lime trees to the left rose the hills of Balbashikha, to the right those of Shikhan. Yashka drew in his horse until the other caught up with him. . . .

"Now!"

Yashka turned sharply and threw himself, like a whirlwind, on the drowsy Tatar. Akhmetka screamed and clutched at his rifle. Together they fell on to the mill-bank, Yashka dealt a powerful blow at the outstretched hand—the rifle flew aside and Akhmetka's arm hung down limply.

The two men wrestled in silence, breathing deeply. Their horses stood near, munching the juicy green branches and observing the two figures rolling over the ground.

"Devil, devil," Yashka hissed. "You devil."

A lump of muddy earth hit him in the face. He released Akhmetka's right arm, and the Tatar's fingers were at once buried in his neck. Akhmetka held him down firmly with his legs. Yashka exerted all his strength. Blue veins swelled in his forehead; he felt sickness rising from his stomach. The dyke, the horses, the bushes swam and then whirled mistily before his eyes. The whole world seemed upside down, and then receded. . . .

"A-ah!" Akhmetka exclaimed joyfully.

Two thin red streams trickled from Yashka's lips on to his neck. . . . He jerked his head violently; the Tatar's fingers slipped down and grasped his throat just by the collar-bone. Yashka growled, and again harnessed all his strength; he sprang up, lifting Akhmetka with him, and struck out. . . .

Something fell from the mill-bank into the swiftly flowing water.

Yashka fell at the horse's feet, clawing the mud with his fingers. He sighed deeply and shuddered. Then, expecting a further attack from Akhmetka, he jumped up.

Akhmetka was nowhere to be seen.

"So"—Yashka's fists unclenched—"so he . . . the bald-head's frightened . . . he's run away."

Swaying, he walked to the middle of the bank, thinking that now he would bring home not one, but two horses. He heard something splashing and struggling in the water, and shrank back, all his muscles tense. Gradually his body relaxed.

"Perhaps. . . . It must be a fish." He listened again. "It must have got caught in the chains . . . or something."

Yashka looked over the embankment and sprang back, his face distorted. At the sluice-gates, where the water rushed over the lock, a pair of boots bobbed up and down like two bladders. A little lower, his clothes entangled in the oaken piles of the embankment, was Akhmetka.

THE THIRD LINK

I

The sun bathed the earth in a warm, caressing light. The spring streams no longer gurgled down the slopes of the Krapivny valley. The Volga no longer roared in the breaking of the ice. It flowed calmly and broadly, grey-blue in the sun, and the water spread over the banks and the low-lying ground. The wild raspberry bushes in the valley sent out young shoots and covered themselves with large speckled leaves. A hedge-sparrow was building her nest among the bushes. Her mate kept guard, fluttering the soft feathers at its neck, jumping from twig to twig. Its movements frightened the field-mice.

The wind stirred among the dry manure heaps in the streets of Shirokoye, and burrowed into the thatched roof of Shlenka's hut, carrying wisps of straw over the bushes to the river Alai, where they settled in the green branches of the willow trees.

"Oh, curse it," Shlenka growled, walking away from the river-bank. "Every spring the wind carries my roof away. It's enough to drive a man mad."

"You ought to fix some wooden planks over it," Stepan Ognev called out. "Then it would keep. You only put brushwood on it. How do you expect it to keep firm?"

"That's enough, that's enough," Shlenka replied. "You don't have to preach at me. I've learnt as much as I need, thank God. If I had a son in Moscow I'd also——"

"What about my son? He doesn't cover my roof for me," Ognev laughed back.

"We know all about that." Shlenka waved an arm. "He doesn't cover your roof, but there are other things. . . . Do you think the people don't know?"

"Look out, Shlenka. Keep a check on your tongue, or it won't be long before it takes you to a place where there'll be no need for you to look out."

"Don't you threaten me. I've had enough of it," Shlenka murmured almost inaudibly, and walked up the clay path to his hut.

Ognev watched him for a few minutes, then drew some wet and slippery bark out of the water, flung it over his shoulder and called into the bushes:

"I'm off, Stesha, and you hurry up."

"Who did he mean? Our Serge?"

"Yes. . . . He thinks God does other people's work for them while they sleep."

There was only one thing that Shlenka wanted—bread. He often dreamed of bread. Once he dreamt that mountains of wheat were piled up in his hut, and the whole yard covered with cakes. . . . But it was only a dream; a man can see anything in a dream. The previous night Shlenka had dreamt that by an extraordinary decree from Moscow he was appointed chief of the whole district, and all night he had gobbled sweet cakes. In the morning Lukeria had said hoarsely:

"Vassya, that's the end of the rye biscuits."

"Oh, it would have been better not to wake up at all. Better to sleep and sleep. For people like us there's only a good life in dreamland."

He looked down the river Alai. Fish were playing in the water, and wild ducks darted among the reeds.

"If only I could catch some fish," he thought. "Only the nets, curse them, got rotted during the winter. The old witch"—referring to his wife—"didn't look after them. Plakushchev's got a net, I heard. . . . Perhaps I could borrow it? All the same he can't go fishing, he's much too ill."

Shlenka's thoughts turned to Karasyuk. . . . Since the day that the bandits had been in Shirokoye, the peasants had grown as quiet as chickens in their coops at night, but Shlenka expected that at any moment somebody would rap at the window of his hut and call him to attend the division of the grain. Sometimes he would suddenly question Manafa:

"Hi, you, Secretary. Isn't the grain going to be divided yet?"

But Manafa only answered:

"The Soviet grain isn't going into your belly."

The spring days passed slowly in this craving for bread.

. . . From early morning until late night Shlenka wandered about the hut like a hungry horse tied to a staple, watching the wind making holes in the thatched roof and the fish splashing in the Alai. Eagerly he followed up every rumour, as a hound follows a hare, and when Ognev again appeared in Shirokoye, wearing Karasyuk's greatcoat, the rumours vanished like stones in water, spreading circles and dying away.

"May he go to the devil when he dies," Shlenka thought. "But where is there some bread? . . ."

2

Bending like a young sapling over the bank of the Alai, Steshka beat the linen with a wooden rolling-pin. She slapped vigorously, then wrung the clothes tightly and thin streams of water fell down, ruffling the blue smoothness of the stream. Steshka glanced at her reflection in the disturbed water. The large, slightly greenish eyes and heavy eyebrows danced in the ripples. Her long plaits fell over her shoulder, and her breasts pressed firmly against the blouse as she leaned forward. Steshka covered them with her left hand, and with the other beat the linen again.

Humming a mournful song, she turned every minute to look up at the clay path. Nowadays she always fetched water from the Alai. True, it was a little farther from the hut than the spring, but Steshka's foot hurts every morning. She had scratched it on a nail, and it was very painful in the morning. It was difficult to clamber down the Krapivny valley to reach the spring. The Alai may be a little farther, but it is not so steep, and besides . . . every morning she saw Yashka, up to his waist in water, cutting young branches from the willow trees to make baskets, and whistling a song. . . . When he saw Steshka, he would throw the sickle over his shoulder and greet her loudly.

"Ah—Steshka. Good morning, Steshenka."

"Hallo!" Steshka answers. "You've made the water all muddy, look."

She dips her buckets into the water, fixes them on the pole and, bending under their weight, walks up the path.

"It's a lovely day to-day," she calls down.

"Yes, it's a lovely day, Steshenka."

"And the starlings, look!" She points to the bushes. "The starlings have turned black already."

"The starlings have turned black," Yashka answers, wading to the bank. "And the she-birds are already sitting in the nests."

"Yes, they're sitting in their nests," Steshka laughs back, and goes a little higher.

Yashka has only to call a few words to her from the bushes, and her foot does not hurt any more, and home is just a little way away—one or two steps, and she will have to come back again to get water for the samovar.

"I thought you were going to make a basket for me?"

"Of course I will, Steshka. . . . Such a basket, you'll see," and Yashka's bare feet slip-slapped along the path.

"Shlenka is always hanging about his house," Steshka says, hurrying.

"Oh, well, he'll have to get used to it."

But to-day Yashka had not come, and somehow the fishes did not play so merrily in the water, and the wild ducks did not dart so gaily among the reeds, and Steshka, staring into the water, could see a thin furrow in her forehead, and mournfully clouded eyes. . . .

She began to rinse the linen a second time, a second time she wrung it, disturbing the blue surface of the Alai. . . . Still Yashka had not come. . . .

Something that Olena had said worried her.

Since the day that Yashka had returned from his adventure with the Tatar, bringing back the bundles of Ilya Plakushchev's clothes, he had become a hero in the eyes of the young men of the village, and as for the girls—each one of them waited eagerly for a caress from Yashka, and Yashka was very generous in these matters, and joked with the girls. Steshka's heart, too, beat more quickly when he put his arm round her shoulders at the evening gatherings, and held her more tightly than he did the others. . . .

The previous evening Steshka had stayed at home. It was the fortieth day after Grandfather Khariton's death. Olena had visited her in the morning and told her that very late at night—it was at second cock-crow—Yashka Chukhliav was returning home with a group of young men, all quite drunk, when he stopped at Plakushchev's hut and began to jeer at Steshka.

"I've only got to whistle," he boasted. "I've only got to

crook my finger and Steshka will come with me to the hay loft."

"To the hay loft!" The furrow in her forehead deepened. "I'll show him hay loft!"

But her heart contracted, the large eyes grew dim and her lips twitched in pain.

"Yes, as soon as Yashka comes I will tell him what I think of him. 'Yasha,' I'll say, 'have I ever done you any harm? Have I ever offended you? Why do you speak evil of me? Do you think because I've been friendly to you you can make fun of me? No, Yasha, I'm not that sort. I won't wash your feet and then drink the water instead of tea.' "

Her thoughts stopped short at this point. Grief swelled in her, making her eyes misty; her body seemed to become one with the sighing of the reeds and the rustle of the bushes. . . .

"A rascal I was born
And a rascal I will die. . . ."

A deep voice broke the stillness of the Alai. Steshka shuddered and began to rinse the clothes again.

"Now! He'll be here in a minute," she thought, bending lower over the stream. Behind her she could hear Yashka's hasty footsteps, his soft laughter. She wanted to leave her work and tear the joyful mood away from him. At that moment Shlenka called from above.

"Yasha! Yasha! Come here a minute, my dear boy."

Yashka reached Shlenka's hut in a few long strides.

"He's a strong fellow," Steshka thought. "But a camel's also strong."

"Do tell me how you managed that Tatar——" Shlenka's words were lost in choking laughter.

Quickly Steshka placed the basket of linen on her shoulder, walked up the path and passed Yashka without looking in his direction.

"Steshka! Steshka!" Yashka called.

Her body stiffened, but she did not look back.

"What's up with her, then?"

"What? Oh, you can't manage her like the Tatar," Shlenka sniggered. "The whole family's the same," he added, a moment later. "All stuck-up. They won't stoop to anybody. And how can you get on in this world without stooping?"

That morning Shlenka watched Yashka hacking down the willow branches carelessly and indifferently, stirring up the mud with his feet.

"Look how she's hurt him—he's like a wild boar," Shlenka murmured, and went off to visit Ilya Plakushchev.

3

Ilya Plakushchev was lying down in the front room. His cheeks had fallen in, and his face was as wrinkled as an old soldier's boot. His beard was matted, and looked like the tail of an unkempt dog, and his eyes wandered over the pine-wood ceiling. At times he groaned between clenched teeth, and rubbed his chest. The bed creaked at every movement. He had been lying there for forty-one days, complaining of everything: of his stomach, and the pains in his back and head. He had sent for the doctor from the district town; the man rubbed his body with spirits, and fed him on powders for a week. It was torture. He sent the doctor away. Now he lay alone, counting the boards in the ceiling, staring at the cracks, silent and thoughtful.

Spring passed over the fields, but he was not there. A stranger—the labourer Arkhipka—sowed the grain: wheat, barley and millet. The spring fields grew green, but he was not there to see how green they were . . . if only he could see them, just with one eye! Every evening he stared out of the window and watched the horses being led into the yard; they were muddy, and something was wrong with one of the hoofs of the year-old foal.

Ilya Maximovich often scolded his people because of the horses.

"It won't do! What would you feel like if you didn't have a bath for a whole year? There isn't any muck left in the stables—it's all sticking to the horses. Everything's going to the dogs! I've only got to lie down for a bit, and everything goes to the wind. . . ."

The people of Shirokoye looked upon the Plakushchev family as very self-willed and hard. . . . Ilya Maximovich was aware of this and often boasted, as they sat together at meals:

"Our family—the Plakushchevs—we're not like other people, like the Pyriakins or Shlenka. . . . We can make sweets out of manure, and from sweets we can make—well, goodness only knows what!"

But when his neighbours spoke about the Plakushchevs, they would say, referring particularly to Grandfather Maxim: "The old man's so stingy, he doesn't empty the slop pails till he's spent half an hour wondering if it can be used in any way . . . that's what he's like." To which Ilya Maximovich would answer: "Carefulness isn't foolishness. . . . You try to live so that you've got something to be stingy about. Look at Shlenka, he's got nothing to be mean about if he wanted to. . . ."

Nowadays Ilya Maximovich felt that he had lowered his family in the village's estimation. He was broken, and held on only by a thin thread. If the thread snapped—it would mean the end of the Plakushchevs' position in the village. Who would marry Zinka? What sort of husband would she find? It would be a good thing to get into the Chukhliav family, or the Kataev's. But supposing some good-for-nothing got hold of her, who would scatter to the four winds the fruits of his accumulation of many years—what then? For what purpose had he eaten black bread all his life, and worn unbleached linen, and bowed his head when he slaved for the landlord Sutiagin, and scraped and saved?

Muddy tears trickled down into the matted beard.

"I was stupid," he sighed. "I grasped a rotten branch, and it broke. I wanted to give power into the hands of a bandit like Karasyuk—he was the rotten branch. I forgot that if you only give way an inch to a peasant, he'll eat you up inside and all, and still he won't be satisfied and curse you and say : he was so thin, damn him—all bones. . . . Oh, you blockhead!"

A hundred times he beat his high, domed forehead for his reception of Karasyuk, and searched about in his mind for a firm branch, strong enough to hold, not one, but a dozen men, and still not break.

Groaning, he sat up, slipped his emaciated yellow legs over the side, and sat on the edge of the bed.

"Land," he said, staring fixedly into a dark corner. "Because of land Sutiagin's great-grandfather, Prince Ermolov, whipped the peasants; because of land the peasants threw the landlords in the Volga. . . . The peasants will not let go of the land, and so,"—he bent each finger in succession, as if he were reckoning up the profit on a deal—"everything comes from the land, the land is the cause of everything."

In the intensity of his concentration, his forehead gathered into wrinkles, his lips trembled and his eyes stared more fixedly into the dark corner.

"And the land—those thieves, those Communists, those Sovietists, they took it away from the masters. And what did they do with it? They gave it to the peasants. They've got peasants' teeth, these Communists, strong, and that's why Stepka's strong, and that's why——"

He put on shoes and trousers and sat down by the bench at the gate. . . . After forty-one days the street seemed quite different. Did it look newer, or older? Even the willow trees at the bridge looked bigger and somehow strange, and the apple trees in Nikita Gurianov's garden were whispering and laughing to each other. . . . He turned his head away, covered his eyes with his hands and shrank into himself, thinking deeply.

Chukhliav turned the corner. For some time he stared at Plakushchev as at a risen corpse, then he came forward slowly, sat down at the other's side, and said kindly:

"Ah, Ilya Maximovich, how the illness has wasted you! . . . Healthier-looking people than you have been put in their coffins. . . . You're quite grey."

Ilya Maximovich raised his head and looked gravely at Chukhliav.

"Yes," he said at last. "There's a fever in all my body. Everything aches, my legs and my back and my inside—it's terrible." He was silent for a moment, looking into the distance. "Ah well, Yegor Stepanovich, the game was played badly, tails up all the time."

Yegor Stepanovich took off his cap and rested it on his bony knee, growling in dissatisfaction, whether at the affair with Karasyuk or at Plakushchev's illness it was impossible to say.

"Well," he muttered, "but under the tails there are heads."

They were silent.

The wind swept the dust along the streets, stirred the young branches of the trees and made Shlenka, who was crossing the bridge, lean forward to resist its force.

"We got hold of a rotten branch, Yegor Stepanovich," Plakushchev said. "Well,"—he shrugged his shoulders—"how can a man know?"

"Yes," Chukhliav answered quickly, dropping his voice at the sight of Shlenka. "And they're up to something again—

that fellowship. They've got their spades into Brusski. I passed by this morning. Davidka was there, Yakushev, Mitka Spirin, Nikolka and Vanka, with all their womenfolk. Only Stepka wasn't there, but he also turned up afterwards. And they're all slaving away."

4

As the sun set behind Balbashikha, sending long, soft rays over the pine-woods, and the passing cattle covered the huts of Shirokoye in dust, the members of the fellowship came into the Krivaya street and stopped at Stepan Ognev's gate, clinking their spades and dinner-pails.

"Well, listen to me," Nikolai Pyriakin said. "I suggest that we all meet on the land at sunrise to-morrow, or else we won't be ready before Christmas."

"You're in too much of a hurry, Kolya," Ognev answered with a smile. "You'd better be careful that all your enthusiasm doesn't run away."

"Me? I'll do more than all of you put together! You'll be at your last gasp, and I'll still carry on." Nikolai tapped his spade on the ground. "I'm as strong as a horse. I may be lazy, but I'm as hard as flint."

"That's enough now." Katya smiled at him reproachfully. "Flint! You ought to see him when he comes home! He just sits and groans."

"And my man,"—Elena pointed to Mitka Spirin—"you can't get him up in the morning, not with hot coals. This morning he rested on his hands and knees, and didn't have the strength to get up on his feet . . . said he felt like his back was broken by a big wagon."

"It's hard work," Mitka said in a low voice, looking at his feet. "It's a hundred times harder than harvesting."

"Hard? If it wasn't hard Brusski would have been in somebody's hands long ago! Besides, it isn't easy to get anything that's sweet. But you can't help being sorry for the women; why should they be worn out before their time?"

The men looked at Davidka Panov, and then at their wives. In the tired eyes of the women joy throbbed, as, for a moment, water can be discerned gleaming behind dark bushes.

"Well, wait. We'll soon have ploughs and horses. The district Soviet has promised us; then the women won't have

to work like this; they'll be free," Ognev said, consoling them.

"It will be fine having the horses," Davidka agreed. "But our pockets are full of holes—otherwise they're quite empty." He scratched his bald head.

"Oh, so there you are," Shlenka shouted from a distance. "They say that the corn's a yard high on Brusski."

At Shlenka's laughter the group drew closer together. Ognev's head stood out above them. The spade trembled in his hand. Then his lips curved mockingly.

"And you, my friend, don't you ever go into the fields yourself, that you just repeat what other people say? We've seen what's growing in your fields. It's covered with cakes, all over cakes and meat pies. Where did you learn to do that?"

"They're cakes left by the cows," laughed Pyriakin. "They've been there since autumn."

"You walk up to the knees in cow cakes in your fields," Elena shouted.

Crestfallen, Shlenka pulled his shirt straight and fidgeted.

"You'd better go and look at the fields, just for once," Ognev advised amid general laughter, and turned his head towards the Volga.

The others followed his glance, and then sat down in silence on the bench outside the hut.

The girls and boys of the village had gathered together by the Volga, those from Zaovrazhenoye on the hill at the farther side of the Krapivny valley and those from the Krivaya street on the nearer side, on the rock of Stenka Razin.

Surrounded by a ring of young men, Yashka Chukhliav was executing a wild dance on the rock, his head bare and his shirt-collar open. He seemed possessed by a super-abundance of joy and energy. Nobody must think that there was anything else in it; he simply wanted to show his exuberance in all its fullness. Tossing his head like a young bull, he sang in a deep, bass voice, and the others joined in, taking up the words, and the treble voices of the girls rose higher and the full stream of sound echoed back from the rock and spread over the Volga.

"Hurrah, hurrah! Carry on!" Yashka cried, his eyes burning.

From the hill came a burst of laughter. Steshka Ognev

was there, surrounded by boys and girls. Until then she had been lying beside Peka Kataev, looking, in her grey dress, like a lizard resting under a bush, and, in the sight of all Krivaya street, she had woven a wreath of flowers for his big, fluffy head. Now, quite suddenly, she sprang up, threw up her head and the circle of boys and girls closed about her. They sang, and their voices swept over the valley to meet the song of the other group.

In the evening stillness the song, a high, clear treble from the girls, a full and valiant bass from the boys, spread over the silver smoothness of the Volga, and was lost in the roar of the Devil's Gulf. At times Steshka's voice reached Yashka over the Krapivny valley. He had seen her picking flowers and making a wreath for Peka Kataev. Well, let her! It was no concern of his. He had Zinka Plakushchev at his side—a jolly, well-built girl. She sang in a ringing voice and did not once glance at the Volga—no! She looked only at Yashka's unruly hair, at his broad chest and powerful hands.

"Carry on, Zinka! Louder!" he cried encouragingly.

Abruptly the singing ceased on both sides of the valley, and above the rhythmic roar of the Volga and the splashing of the nets two voices resounded: a deep girl's voice and the high, bell-like notes of a boy. At the top of the hill, full in the sun, they saw Steshka's grey dress and the broad, swaying back of Peka Kataev.

"Yashka, Yashka!" Zinka cried.

But Yashka, leaping over bushes and garden fences, was already dashing across the valley, making for the other side. The boys followed him. They were met by the boys from the hill, and within a few minutes blows were being exchanged at the bottom of the valley. Sticks whistled through the air, the boys were yelling and shouting. . . .

Steshka ran along the narrow path through the valley, kicked the door of the hut open with her foot and, scarcely breathing, flung herself on her mother's neck.

"Mother, mother, I forgot . . . to get the samovar ready."

"What are you talking about? What's the matter, Steshenka?"

"What's up?" Stepan asked, coming into the hut.

"You see, her foot hurts, it's all inflamed. . . . Do go away! What do you want to mix in women's affairs for?"

The whole night, turning from side to side on the broad bunk, Steshka sobbed quietly. Troubled and excited, she tried to make her choice between Yashka Chukhliav and Peka Kataev.

5

The Kataevs had once been called Yashin, and had lived on the spot where Yegor Stepanovich built his fine house after the fire. They had moved to Zaovrazhenoye where, Grandfather Katai insisted, the land was more suitable for gardens and beehives. Nor were the people there so mean as those in the Krivaya street.

There, somewhat apart from the other dwellings, Grandfather Katai had built his home. It took him about five years, and was wholly the work of his own hands. The house itself was made of thick pine logs, and the sheds and stables of birch wood strengthened with clay. For the roof he had cut a double-tailed weathercock, and over the door he placed an image of the Virgin of Kazan, to guard his household against every misfortune, against fire, plague and all other unnecessary evils which may befall a peasant.

A large family had sprung up around Grandfather Katai, nine persons in all. And though they were not all twigs from the same branch, nobody could deny that they were a fine and handsome family. His son Zakhar was as strong as a mountain, and Zakhar's two sons, Alexis and Peter, could do more than their share when it came to work or fighting. Alexis' young wife was as round and sweet as a sugar-cake. She had two healthy children, who had already rubbed the skin from Grandfather Katai's back. As soon as he entered the hut, they clambered on his back and made him play at being a horse. Nor had Grandmother Khrestia any intention of seeking her grave just yet; it was her job to milk the cows in the morning. And of Zakhar's wife, Varvara, not one evil word was spoken in the whole village. She was hard-working, friendly, hospitable. Only Grandfather Katai seemed to have become smaller in the last few years, as though he were growing nearer to the earth. The bald patch on his head looked as if a cow, in some unhappy moment, had licked off the hair. It spread from his forehead to the nape of his neck, and his beard was very thin, like oats in a bad harvest. And Katai's eyes were rather dim,

like water covered with a film of dust; he felt cold even in the hot weather, but still he would have his way.

"The Yashins are dead and buried these hundreds of years, and with me a new family has started, the Kataevs. And in my household I am master."

"Without a master the house is indeed an orphan," Zakhar agreed.

Grandfather Katai did not notice the smile that came to the lips of Zakhar and the others, as if they were listening, not to a grey-bearded old man, but a three-year-old boy. He went on:

"How can you compare the young men of to-day with what we were? In my time, I used to put on wet clothes and go to the shed and work away with the axe—that made the clothes dry. But the men of to-day aren't like that. They put their work on to an iron thing"—(Katai called every machine an iron thing)—"and that iron—it's only iron—it just makes for laziness. But I must say," he corrected himself, "I must say that my boys are not like that. They're workers. They take after me."

Sometimes at evening, when a visitor from Alai or Nikolskoye was spending the night with the Kataevs, and at supper they discussed the good luck of certain people, Grandfather Katai would wave a reproachful arm and mutter crossly:

"What are you saying? What is there to envy? Everything comes from work. But nowadays everybody wants cream. What is there to envy? When I was young——"

On such occasions Katai would always tell of the fever which seized the peasants of Alai, Nikolskoye and Shirokoye when the landlord Sutiagin began to squander his immense forest possessions. . . . Yes, that was a long time ago. Aleksa and Peka were still crawling round on their stomachs, and Katai's eyes were clear and even in the frostiest weather he would go about without a shirt. Yes, Grandfather Katai remembered those days very well. The sale of the forest had been announced in the spring and in the middle of summer many peasants sold everything they possessed, lived in cellars dug out of the earth and took all their money to Sutiagin. . . . Katai himself had sold his two horses, his cattle and the grain which he had been storing for years; and for three hundred silver roubles he bought from Sutiagin six *dessiatins* of land.

In the autumn the saws started to work in Sutiagin's

forest, the axes rang, the hoary trees quivered and fell, and the depths of the forest, where formerly scarcely a wild beast had penetrated, resounded with the cries of the peasants. During the winter Katai and Zakhar continued to fell the trees, and in spring they hired Tatars to float the wood down the Volga to Saratov. Then they began to uproot the stumps.

"That was what I call work," Katai said enthusiastically. "We used to get so tired that our legs felt as stiff as the tree stumps. But we didn't stop. We just took off our shirts, spat on our hands—carry on, boys, and in the evening there'll be a glass of vodka; and we carried on."

From that time the people of Shirokoye forgot that he had been christened Vavil, and called him Katai ("carry on"). He was rather pleased with the nickname.

"It was given me for work, because I worked so much that I got ruptured more than once, and I had to be all bandaged up. All my inside seemed to fall out. It was the way we worked. . . ."

In the following spring Katai sowed the fields with millet and in the autumn he put two hundred roubles away in a tin box, which had once held sweets. The next autumn the land was covered with a healthy crop of wheat, and at the end of four years Katai whispered to Zakhar:

"That's the second thousand begun, my son, and there are forty sacks of grain in the barn."

"Well," the visitor would ask, "you worked and you saved, and what then? What's the result?"

At that Grandfather Katai would silently leave the table, cross himself hurriedly before the Kazan virgin, and climb on to his bunk. The others, especially Khrestia, quickly cleared the table . . . and the story went on. Unexpected and unforeseen, a storm swept over the fields of Shirokoye. How the gale started, and from whence it blew, Katai could not say. Strange people appeared in the village, speaking an unknown and incomprehensible language, and the peasants who were once content to wear bast shoes, and to eat plain soup, began to teach the old men how life should be lived. Then the land was divided, and everything was turned upside down. The land that had been bought from Sutiagin was also divided, including Katai's fields. Katai received a piece of land in the pine ravine. It had belonged to Chukhliav. Chukhliav was dealt with in the same fashion. He was assigned a piece of land that had belonged to Plakushchev,

while Plakushchev got some of Mitri Zdorkin's land. . . . It was not all in one place, but scattered in several strips over the fields of Shirokoye. You might have to go seven *versts* over strangers' fields to get from one of your strips to the next.

"It's a whole mess-up, a whole mess-up, my son. What does it all mean?"

"This is the revolution, father," Zakhar explained. "It means we can live without masters. If you fight against it, you may lose your head . . . because it's all for the people."

"For the people? I don't understand, my son. What good does it do the people to have everything topsy-turvy? What couldn't we have done with our land? We would have done things which would have made everybody stare in wonder, and now, what can we do? It's all been cut up! Do you think that Stepka Ognev or Shlenka really care about the land? No! If you labour on the land, you mustn't spare your back. And them—when you're coming home from the fields you can see them, shading their eyes from the sun so that it shouldn't disturb their sleep. No, my son, they've got the gentry's habits. Do you remember Sutiagin's grandfather, old Evgraf, God rest his soul! Why did he whip me till my back was all in blood? Because we'd bought a piece of land from his lordship, and although he had the money he wanted the land back again. And he got it back, and then Sutiagin wasted it all. Now his relations, or some other people, want to take the land back again. They say: let's turn these Bolshiks loose on them. The people will get angry and turn everything upside down, and they'll be eaten up with lice and have to feed on the grass in the valley, and then when they're tired of wagging their tongues, we'll step in and get the land back into the masters' hands. . . . That's what it is, my son, that's how they've arranged it all, you take my word for it."

When Katai heard that the Bolsheviks were taking away the grain, he took Zakhar aside one evening and whispered:

"Wasn't I right, my son? Have you heard? They're taking the grain away from the peasants, they're taking his blood—wasn't I right?"

That night strange carts creaked softly in Katai's yard, and until dawn the voices of Tatars were heard. The rich grain poured from the barn into the carts.

"Twenty roubles a sack! Twenty roubles! What do you think of it? I've never heard anything like it in my life,"

Katai whispered. "Where do they get so much money from, these Tatars? Who'll give them twenty roubles for it? Don't be obstinate, my son. Now we've got about three thousand roubles between us, and with three thousand a man can live with folded arms."

Days passed into years, slowly and incomprehensibly to Katai. The peasants went into the fields, the wheels of the carts squeaked. They oiled them with butter and drank tea with dried marrow instead of sugar; they moved about strangely, grey figures in homespun clothes.

Silently Katai would finger the paper money in a corner of the room. Wetting his fingers, he counted the rustling notes. Then he hid the tin box under a stone and covered it with clay. He threw a pile of rubbish into the corner, and every day he would examine the place to see if a strange hand had not torn away the cobwebs.

"Father," Zakhar urged him sometimes. "Buy something for the money. A calf, or something else. . . ."

"A calf? For three thousand? Are you out of your senses? Or are you a calf yourself? Is there a golden calf?"

"Father, don't deceive yourself," Zakhar answered angrily. "You know yourself the money's only got a little value to-day. Why, a box of matches costs a hundred roubles."

"What? Oh yes, I know, I know." Katai rubbed his nose. "These days, my son, we're living on the edge of a precipice. Something's terribly wrong. The land has all been cut up, the barns are empty, and now they've started on the money. It's worth nothing. But, believe me, they themselves are filling their pockets right enough. A peasant's a fool, they say, it's easy to throw dust in his eyes. He's only an ass. Let's wait, my son, let's wait, and then afterwards . . . for three thousand roubles we'll buy a fine piece of land, and we'll keep bees again—such a lot of them."

After that Grandfather Katai did not speak a word to anybody about the money, but the thought of it aged him. When he saw that the walls of Nikita's hut were papered with notes like those which he had hidden in the box in the corner, he gave in, and for the three thousand roubles he bought from Petka Kudeyarov a pair of shoes for his wife. In addition to the money he had to give Petka a whole loaf of bread; the bread was counted as two million roubles and the three thousand were, so to speak, just thrown in for a makeweight. When he received the bread and the money,

Kudeyarov came out into the street, threw the "Tsar's paper" in the air, and cried:

"Here's what Katai has been hoarding all his life. And I'm throwing it away to the wind."

How could a man speak of such things? Merely to think about them was enough to turn his inside over. Katai lay on the bench by the stove. At the door he saw Grandmother's shoes, toe to toe. One sole was loose. The shoes were made of pressed birch bark.

"The swine," Katai muttered quietly. "As if he couldn't have put a good sole to it. It's nothing but paper."

Sighing deeply, he got up from the bench.

It was morning. Soon it would be mid-day, soon tomorrow—Whitsun. The hut was empty.

"Everybody's at work, and I'm still lying here. . . ."

Katai knew that Zakhar had not fogotten the money and the shoes. He knew, too, that since he had bought the shoes he had lost his authority over the members of his family. Nobody feared him any longer; they had forgotten to leave him his proper place at table, and it seemed to Katai that he had only to say one wrong word, take one false step, and Zakhar would hurl a biting reproach at him. "You old hound," he might say one day. "Is this why we tore out our guts pulling up the roots? All that labour for a pair of shoes? There they are, take them. That's what we sweated blood for! . . ." No, it was better to die without reproaches, to die at work.

Stretching his stiff, unsteady legs, Katai dragged his bare feet over the dirty floor and went out into the yard.

The huts were sleeping, and seemed to quiver through the mist. Two pigs were lying in a puddle in the yard and the shrill voices of children playing by the river reached his ears.

"I'll tear some bark," Katai decided. "I expect Zakhar's boots are all broken, and I know Leksa's and Peka's want mending. . . ."

He took a piece of rope from a corner of the yard, threw it over his bony shoulder and stepped slowly and carefully across the garden towards the thicket of lime trees.

6

Katai walked along the edge of the clearing, his feet shuffling through the dry green grass. Now and again he

scratched his head. At times he stopped to take breath, and to watch the people in the fields, and then went on. When he had passed the clearing and the birch-wood, he noticed Yashka Chukhliav ploughing his field.

"Only two furrows left, and he'll be finished," Katai thought. Aloud he called: "God help you, Yasha, little friend."

"It wouldn't be bad if he did walk along the furrows, and with bare feet, too. That would be a help."

"What?" Katai raised his head. "What?"

"Along the furrows, I said," Yashka answered, emphasising each syllable. "Let him walk here in the furrows, and I'll rest under the bushes for a bit. It's all very well to help up there in the sky."

Katai waved his hand and thought: "What sort of people there are nowadays! They quarrel with everybody. They quarrel with God and with the old men."

"How's the bald spot, Grandfather? They say you prophesied a good harvest at the river Jordan."

Katai did not remark the tone of irony. He slapped his head, and kept pace with Yashka.

"It's getting on all right," he said. "It's been made that way. . . ."

"The wind's blowing hard. The fields are crusted a finger deep—and look at the dust. . . . How about the bald spot? Will it change?"

"Oh, my friend, you're still too young. It's hard to explain everything to you. How can I tell you plainly? The lot of a man is decided, one here, one there. Everybody's got his own path. It's all laid down in the book of heaven."

"How is it written in the book? In pencil or in ink?"

"What? Only God knows that. . . ."

"So that's how it is? Well, now, in our Soviet—you go to Manafa, and ask for a note or anything, it must be written in ink. Pencil won't do."

Yashka's lips were quivering with restrained laughter, but Katai only wrinkled his high, waxen forehead.

"Yes, it means its already decided." Katai was silent for a moment. "It all comes from quarrelling. Everybody's at loggerheads with each other, and this is the punishment."

"What do you mean by that?" Yashka laughed.

"The punishment is coming through you." He pointed to the field. "That's why nothing grows, and there's no

bread. . . . All through you, and the bandits also through you. . . ."

"Oh! So it's all through us? All right, I agree. But tell me, do we come from you or from cats?"

"What: I can't hear; say it louder."

"Are we descended from you or from cats?"

"Oh, well, it's quite clear, from us and not from fleas."

"Well, then, for what sins of yours did God send us to you? What wicked things did you do before we came into the world?" Yashka laughed softly at his joke.

"That's what I can't quite understand. . . ."

Yashka burst into a loud peal of laughter and cried:

"Perhaps God sends us these troubles for our own sins. It serves us right. We shouldn't sin. But you! Why do you sit all your life on pins and needles, frightened because when you finish, you can't even——"

Katai rubbed his thigh and, lowering his head, replied before Yashka could finish: "I can't explain it to you. I can't find out; it's for some sin, I'm sure, but what and how——" Katai walked on, muttering to himself.

"I'll ask Zakhar when I get back," he thought. "I'll ask Zakhar. He knows all about it. You're head's too quick for me," he called to Yashka.

Yashka laughed. "If things went according to my head, I'd be right on top. I'd be on the C.E.C. That's the place for me. . . ."

7

Grandfather Katai's thin, bent back disappeared beyond the clearing. Yashka took some small cucumbers and a chunk of bread from a grey packet, cut the bread in small pieces, laid them down on the ground and poured some water from a jug into a dish.

He pushed the food away, dropped his head like a broken sunflower and, his face in his hands, his elbows resting on the ground, looked around him.

Down Balbashikha, a shepherd was driving his cattle in a cloud of dust, to water at the spring. A bird hovered over the field, seeking for prey. Yashka stared at the bird for a long time, and restless thoughts surged through his mind. Kirka Zhdarkin had returned that day from the front. He had been a queer fellow before he went away, tall, clumsy,

scrofulous, with a bluish tinge in his face. The girls refused to look at him, the children called him a tape-worm. Now he was back, in soldier's uniform and wearing a red ribbon on his breast, and to the ribbon was attached the Order of the Red Flag. He seemed to have grown taller and his voice rang like beaten iron. He said that the people of Shirokoye were all moles. Yashka he called a young ox, a lazy and quarrelsome good-for-nothing. In the old days Yashka would have given him a good thrashing; now he could only grind his teeth and mutter.

Since the fight in the Krapivny valley, Yashka really had become violent and quarrelsome. Every night he drank heavily with the other boys of the village. They would gather on the high road, stop the passers-by, and force them either to return or to take a roundabout way. They stole chickens, plucked their feathers, and then set them loose in the streets. Terrified, the chickens ran from side to side, pursued by shrieks. Recently the young peasants had torn up the fence from Nikita Gurianov's garden and thrown it into the river. The following morning Nikita brought his complaint to Yegor Stepanovich.

"Did you see them do it yourself?" Yegor Stepanovich asked.

"No, I didn't. But all the people say they saw him. And it was a new fence, too."

"You know, if a man isn't caught he isn't a thief. If you'd caught him at it yourself, it would be another thing."

"All right," Nikita agreed. "But you'd better look out."

"Look out? That's all very well. You've got to look after your own, and look after others as well—you want more than two eyes for that."

When Nikita had left, Yegor Stepanovich decided: "We must marry him. A wife will draw out all his wildness."

With this thought in his mind, he continually approached Yashka. One day, as they were loading the rye in the barn, preparing it for the mill, Yegor Stepanovich said softly:

"All your comrades, I've heard, are getting ready to marry. The mother's milk isn't dry on their lips yet, and they talk of marrying; it seems to be the custom to-day."

"I haven't asked them."

"My dear boy, why do you speak like that to your father? After all, you haven't got a hundred fathers. You've only got one, and I've only got one son. We're only two in the

whole village, and we must stick together. . . . Strangers always want to get something out of you. . . ."

Later, when the cart was loaded, Yegor Stepanovich, picking a worm off the apple tree by the barn, remarked carelessly:

"Have you been thinking about getting married also? Don't you think it's rather early?"

"I'm not going to be a monk."

"Of course not—why should you be a monk? A monk is like an empty ear of wheat; it blows in the wind, but it's good for nothing, neither for God nor man; that's what I think. They're only there to worry people. And who's the lucky girl?" He turned abruptly to Yashka.

At any other time Yashka would not have betrayed his secret thoughts, but now anger boiled in him. Realising what his father was driving at, he wanted to say something that would hurt the old man.

"Steshka Ognev."

"Oh," Yegor Stepanovich drawled. "You will have your little joke. I'm speaking to you seriously, and that's the way you answer."

"It's not a joke at all. You asked me, and there's your answer."

"Have you gone mad?" Yegor Stepanovich cried. "Or have your brains melted in the spirits?"

"On the contrary, they're in better working order than ever."

"You'd better get that idea right out of your head. We want somebody in the house who's one of our own sort." Brandishing his arms, Yegor Stepanovich walked into the house.

8

The sun burnt hotly and the earth gave back its heat. Steamers and small boats plied up and down the Volga. When the boats passed each other, the people on deck waved their hands; the waves lapped against the sandy banks.

Near the Volga, on the high part of the bank which stood out like a huge, clenched fist, the members of the fellowship were taking their mid-day rest. They lay under the birch trees, groaning and snoring, and sometimes cursing in their sleep.

Under a birch tree apart from the others, her head resting on a sack of grass, Steshka was lying curled up like a snake. Sleep would not come to her, her head was too full of other thoughts. She looked at the Volga, at the distant blueness of the steppes, at the steamers.

"To-day's Saturday," she thought. "To-morrow will be Sunday. . . . Whitsun. To-morrow the girls and boys will go for a picnic to the Dolliny valley. . . . I'll see him there. He's almost sure to come there. . . . I'll gather pine cones, and I'll ask him to come with me. Will he come?" She closed her eyes. One thing worried her—if it were not for that she would have had more patience—the rumour that Yashka no longer came to the evening gatherings because he was getting ready to marry Zinka Plakushchev. The preparations were being made. His father had caught him nicely for his carryings on.

The thought gave Steshka no rest.

"Is it really true? Could he really marry Zinka, live with Zinka all his life?"

When the villagers returned home in the evening, and Yashka passed her in his cart drawn by two horses, Steshka shuddered and watched the broad, receding back of Yashka.

The next day was Whitsunday. Steshka had determined that she would see him. "I'll ask him if it's true what the people say. If only Peka Kataev doesn't poke his nose in. . . . But I'll send him away after another girl."

Steshka wondered how she could overcome the pain, the hot shivering that seized all her body when she saw Yashka, how she could speak to him, without calling forth another insult. . . .

"Sleep, Steshka, go to sleep. You must rest," Ognev said, standing up. "I'll sit over here. If anything happens, just call me. . . ."

Stepan Ognev could not sleep either, his mind was full of heavy thoughts. He could not understand what was happening.

"The business is only at the beginning. We're only at the first stage. We've got the land, and it's covered all over with red stones and weeds. As for grain . . . we're a long way off from that, but the members are changing as quickly as the bast shoes on Shepherd Yegorka's feet. Hardly a week passes but he wants another pair of shoes. It's the same with us. Mitka Spirin's gone, Garasska's gone. . . . They come

and have a try at it, and then they slip off. And he's behind everything, old Iron, only he does it all quietly. He bites from behind, and doesn't say a word."

Ognev knew that Spirin was mowing hay for Chukhliav on the other side of the Volga, and in return Yegor Stepanovich was to plough Mitka's field. Garasska was working for Markel Bykov. Yegor Stepanovich was enticing them away from the fellowship with bits of food, as if they were hungry dogs.

"You know, Stepka," Panov had said that morning, "men don't let go easily. We've got to work together, stand close to each other. Wait till the first hard bit is over, we'll show them what stuff we're made of."

Panov's words had made Ognev happy. He was pleased, too, because Nikolai Pyriakin was heart and soul in the business. When Nikolai joined the fellowship, Ognev had thought: "He'll just be an ornament. He'll hang round for a day or two and then he'll trot back to Moscow."

But no, he was heart and soul in the fellowship.

"Yes," Ognev murmured, kicking pieces of chalk from the cliff into the Volga. "That's what they'd like to do to you. Splash, and you're finished, down at the bottom of the ravine." Then he added: "Well, it only means we must hold on stronger, we mustn't get under their feet and they can't kick you down into the ravine."

He straightened his thin back and ran his fingers through his matted beard. His eyes wandered over the steppes, over the villages lying scattered along the banks of the Irghiz.

"We must fight hard, fight with all our strength," he exclaimed aloud.

He heard soft footsteps behind him, and the sound of a stick knocking against the chalky surface of the rock. Ognev turned round; Yegor Stepanovich stood two or three paces from him.

"I was listening," he said, "and I heard someone say 'We must fight!' Who's going to fight? And it's you. Look," he added, pointing with his stick to the opposite bank of the Volga, "how quickly they're cutting the hay and gathering it in. . . . And how are you getting on here? In my fields. . . ."

Ognev was silent.

"What's the matter, Stepa?" Chukhliav asked, coming nearer and smiling slightly. "Are you thinking of drawing

the Volga into your fellowship? Are you worrying about that, eh?"

"What are you laughing at?"

"I'm not laughing at all," Chukhliav answered in a gruff, kind voice. "Only, I've often told you, drop it. I tell you, drop it. You'll only ruin yourself. I've been looking round —what will you have in winter from all your work? You'll just get dirty from it."

"All right, we'll see. We'll see who's ruined, and we'll see who gets dirty."

"Drop it, you fool," Chukhliav threw at the other's back. 'You're infected with your Commune—the people will have to give you a tar-bath, so that they don't catch the germs." Pleased with his joke, Yegor Stepanovich laughed aloud.

"Well, comrades, get up," Ognev cried, walking to the birch trees. "Get up on your hind-legs, it's time for work. Soon it will be evening."

Drowsily, unwillingly, the co-operators got up, their spades clattering against the ploughs, and moved off towards Brusski.

The wind blew and the earth gave out its heat.

On Brusski, quite close to the Volga, and adjoining the common land, they toiled with their ploughs, drawn by cows or by the members of the fellowship themselves. Ognev, Steshka and Panov went first, dragging a plough which they had made; behind it a narrow furrow stretched through the tangled roots. Following them, his plough drawn solemnly by a brown cow, came Nikolai, raising the dust with his feet. The cow walked slowly, head bent to one side to bite the grass, lowing piteously as if she had lost her calf.

"What, are you still chewing?" Nikolai shouted. "Haven't you had enough yet?" To himself he thought: "What a hole we've got into! Torturing ourselves, and torturing the cattle. We break through it once, and then we have to plough it all over again, and then again. . . . It's just torture."

Moreover, Nikolai had no more flour left. When he had left the hut that morning, Katya said: "That's the end of the flour."

He had scolded her; but was it her fault that there was no more flour left? He felt sorry for his wife. As a girl Katya had been plump and rosy. About three years after her marriage to Nikolai she began to grow thin, to lose her colour.

Now her shoulder-blades stuck out prominently when she walked.

From year to year Nikolai waited for Katya to get plump and rosy again, to win back her charming smile. He was convinced that it would happen, and often said to her:

"Well, when are you going to stop looking like a starved dickybird? Try to put on some weight."

"What can I do?" Katya lowered her head. "I——"

"What can you do? Look at the others. . . ."

"Other people are other people. It's different. . . ."

Nikolai grew angry, scolded and shouted at her. Katya cried softly.

It was always the same. At home he would scold her. When he went out his anger vanished and he felt sorry for Katya.

"When I go home I'll be nice to her," he thought. "I'll say, 'Don't be cross with me, it isn't my fault.' " He felt sorry for Katya, terribly sorry.

"Kolya," Ognev cried. "Where have you wandered off to?"

Nikolai came to himself. The cow had made straight for the green bushes; the furrow trailed behind, running in quite the wrong direction.

"Oh, you dirty swine of a cow!" Nikolai pulled the animal to a halt. "You're always thinking of gobbling, you beast."

Still lowing piteously, her thin legs moving slowly over the ground, the brown cow was brought back to the right path. The trio had drawn two furrows; their shoulders ached and burned from the rubbing of the harness.

"Never mind," Ognev encouraged his two comrades, biting his lips in pain. "Everything sweet comes by labour, and we wanted these sweets, so we must be patient."

The others were silent. In silence they dragged the plough, turning their faces to the sun, sinking, a dusty red, behind the lime trees. Beyond the trees lay the Dolliny valley, and in the valley nestled the hazel trees, and the berry bushes, their twigs curled and intertwined like lace.

"Kirka Zhdarkin," Davidka said suddenly, digging a finger into Ognev's shoulder.

Kirka was walking slowly along the road; his feet moved heavily, as if he were carrying a two-hundredweight sack of flour on his back. One trouser-leg was rolled up, exposing a hairy limb, the other flapped about his naked foot.

Judging by his clothes, and by the splashes of mud on his face, it was clear that Zhdarkin had been working lately in a puddle.

As he drew near the peasants working on Brusski, he hurriedly unrolled the trouser leg and nodded his head, looking past Steshka.

"We ought to get him in," Davidka whispered, overcome by admiration as he watched the muscular figure receding. "He's a horse, not a man. No, don't call him," he added, seeing that Stepan was about to shout something to Zhdarkin. "You go after him and get round him; try to bring him in among us."

"But we must plough."

"Plough? It's nearly sunset, and we two can manage, can't we, Steshka?"

Steshka turned her head from the road and nodded.

"Well, we two together, aren't we great horses? And you, Stepan, run off."

9

At the threshing-ground Ognev caught up with Kirka Zhdarkin. At first they spoke of the front. They had taken part together—both Red Commandants—in the attack on the Whites at Perekop, during which time they had seen a great deal of each other. They spoke of their mutual friends, indulging in reminiscences.

"Well, and what do you think of doing now?" Ognev asked.

"What?" Kirka smiled broadly. "My whole place has been broken up to bits. I've got to build it all up again. They've given me a piece of land next to the Cow's island—it's nothing more than a swamp, one *dessiatin*. I'm thinking of making it into a vegetable-garden."

Kirka went on to speak of how he had been captured during the march on Warsaw, and had been interned in Germany. He had met a German farmer who produced more from three *dessiatins* of land than anybody in Shirokoye. He spoke of the German farmer with the same enthusiasm as he had spoken of the heroic battle at Perekop. Suddenly he noticed the faint smile on Ognev's face and, cutting short his story, said simply:

"I want to make that wretched bit of land of some use to

the State. I want to show the peasants what the land can really give them."

"That's clear," Ognev said. "It's quite clear what you want to do."

By the tone in which the words were spoken, Kirka realised that Ognev was not in favour of his plan and had no confidence in his intentions.

"Do you think, Uncle Stepa, I just want to grab things for myself? Don't think that."

He began to assure Ognev of the sincerity of his wish to turn the peasants from their primitive and wasteful ways, to teach them the stupidity of their attitude towards the land.

"Our peasants want to milk the earth like a cow. They milk it year after year, and never feed it."

The two men descended into the Krapivny valley, crossed the Cow's island, and reached Kirka's swampy piece of land. Birch trees had once stood there; their stumps still stuck out of the ground. A little way off lay a heap of stumps, tangled in a mass of roots. Kirka had already dug them out of the earth.

"They've taken me a fortnight—five of them," Kirka said happily.

Ognev scratched his ear and sighed.

"Do you know what, Kirill," he said. "No, don't interrupt me; let me speak. I know you, and I know that you're not out to grab things for yourself. If you wanted to do that you could find a better place than this. You won't get much out of this."

Kirka rubbed the dried mud from his face, and stared at Ognev in bewilderment.

"I think," Stepan continued, "we must keep pace with our Government and with the Party. We must work hand in hand with them, so that we may have joy in our work. But you won't get any joy out of this. Why do you look at me like that? No, you won't have any joy here, Kirill, because what you want to do is what has been done in the past, and what is still being done now. And we fought so that it shouldn't be like that any more. Take the merchant Migunchik, for example. He understands business much better than our co-operatives, but still, we're all for the co-operatives, and not for Migunchik. And you, as far as I can see, you want to be a Migunchik in the land."

"What are you talking about? I've never even thought of anything like that."

"Haven't you? It often happens like that. A man thinks one thing, but it turns out quite different. Look at Plakushchev. He thought he would set us an example, and what happened? Karasyuk pulled a lump out of his beard. That's how things often turn out."

Kirka laughed loudly. The laughter angered Ognev deeply. He wanted to swear at Kirka as he used to swear at deserters, but he restrained himself and went on quickly:

"You'll regret it soon, and think differently about it. Because while you stick here in this bog, pulling up the roots one by one, all by yourself, and growing rich, we'll have gone on far ahead of you; and you're not the man who's happy just because he's rich. You're not a solitary piece of humanity, and when you see that you've cut yourself off, you'll regret it. You're riding into battle on a log of wood, not on a horse. And where did you get the idea that our State thinks it useful and essential for you and me and people like us to dig up tree stumps, each working separately?"

"And I think," Kirka answered, quite pale, "that soon you'll regret it. They're running away from you already."

"Yes? And some men ran away at the front, but we were still the victors. Some may run away, but others come to take their place."

"You'll have to wait," Kirka retorted. Bending down he fixed his handspike under a birch stump.

It seemed to Ognev that there was something in common between Zhdarkin and the handspike, but what it was he could not say. Walking up the hill he thought:

"How much of the peasant there still is in Kirka!"

As he turned into Krivaya street he saw Yegor Stepanovich Chukhliav sweeping his yard. Ognev hurried on.

"Hallo! You been talking to the German?" Chukhliav shouted to him, his face wrinkling with a smile. "He can't talk of anything but the German."

Ognev did not answer.

"What's the difference between that mole there and Kirka?" he thought, walking towards his hut. "And perhaps Kirka is right after all?" Doubt stole into his mind for a moment. "Perhaps it is true that I'm not pulling in the right direction?"

A few days before he had been summoned to the District

Party Committee, and had been invited to take charge of the District Agricultural Department. He had rejected the offer decisively. Perhaps it was wrong of him to refuse. He looked at his tumble-down hut and imagined a clean, comfortable flat in the town, a desk covered with green baize in the Agricultural Department, and Steshka in pretty town clothes. . . . He thought of Shirokoye, its dilapidated huts, its thin, tired peasants, ready at any moment to attack each other for a piece of bread. . . . He laughed aloud and opened the gate. . . .

10

"To-morrow will be Whitsunday." Yegor Stepanovich was the first in the village to sweep the dust from his yard into the street, to decorate his home with green branches and scatter yellow sand over the floor. When he had finished he sat down on the big red stone.

"They're dogs, that's what they are." Swearing heartily, Shlenka turned the corner of the lane into the street.

"What's up?"

"What's up? Fedunov called on me about the taxes."

"What taxes?"

"I've got to go and chop wood for the school fires. For my part I don't care if they are not heated at all. . . . I don't care a hang. 'You,' he says, 'you're living in a community, and you must do your share of the work.' 'Call this living?' I says, 'I'll go off to the woods and dig a hole in the ground, and I'll live there.' 'And we'll find you there, too,' he says. And what can I do now?"

"Why run away to the woods? You've got to build your life here."

"How can a man build his life here? There's nothing to eat."

"Oh, well," Chukhliav said carelessly, and stood up.

"I say, Yegor Stepanovich, listen. . . . You . . . have got a couple of puds, eh? Have you? I'll give you back . . . after the harvest."

"Oh!" Yegor Stepanovich suddenly clutched at his stomach. "Oh, the devil! What an awful trouble my stomach is!" He ran across the yard, and another idea flashed through his mind. "It might be worth while to give him the flour. We could bring him over to our side; he

might be useful." He called out: "Wait there a minute. Wait till I get a little easier. I've got an awful pain in my stomach."

He stood for a short while out of the other's sight, and then came back.

"Well, my flour's also coming to an end, I'm sorry to say . . . but I must help you if you're in trouble. . . . We'll have to share. But you be quiet about it, I don't want people to think I've got tons of flour. Well, come along."

He prodded Shlenka with a finger and gazed along the street. The street itself was scarcely visible through clouds of dust—the peasants of Shirokoye were sweeping their yards, decorating their walls with birch branches, scattering yellow sand.

Yashka was riding by Stepan Ognev's hut in a cart drawn by two horses; Steshka jumped down from the cart, smiling, shaking her thick plait.

"I'll come round to-morrow if you like," Yashka called to her, and whipped up the horses.

Yegor Stepanovich took off his cap, put it on again, and stood at the gate. His left eyebrow twitched like the tail of a dying fish; stretching out his arms as if to ward off a blow, he shouted to Yashka:

"I'll see to the horses myself, and you can go." He opened the gate quickly. "You can go, and don't let me set eyes on you again."

"Where shall I go?" Yashka was dumbfounded.

"Go to Ognev," Yegor Stepanovich hissed. "Go to Ognev, he's your sort. Clear out of here."

The horses trotted across the yard and began to drink from the large barrel of water that stood in the corner.

"Get down, get down."

"Look!" Yashka pointed to the barrel. "The horses are drinking, and they haven't been rubbed down."

Yegor Stepanovich shut the gate and angrily pulled the horses away from the barrel.

"I know!" he shouted. "I know as well as you do. Clear off, and don't show your face here. . . . I can't bear to look at you," he hissed. "Clear off!"

For a moment or two Yashka felt quite helpless. Then, with surprise, he realised that he was not in the least afraid of his father.

"It's like a circus—I can't help laughing."

"Yashka!" Yegor Stepanovich cried, in a voice which trembled in anger. He rapped his fist on the cart-wheel.

Yashka looked him straight in the face.

"Have you eaten anything that's disagreed with you?"

"Yashka!"

Yegor Stepanovich snatched the whip from the cart and, so quickly that Shlenka blinked, the leather thong cut through the air and cracked over Yashka's back. Yashka sprang from the cart and flung himself on his father. Shlenka watched the two rolling across the yard, heard Yegor Stepanovich's piercing shriek. It startled the horses, which dashed off to the stables. The neighbouring peasants ran to their gates. Shlenka stretched out his arms and shouted:

"Clear off, clear off!"

"Yashka, let me go!" Yegor Stepanovich cried, between gasps. "You're choking me!"

Yashka jumped to his feet, shook himself and stood still. Steshka, standing by the open gate, was staring at him, and behind her the peasants of Shirokoye pressed forward, peering eagerly.

THE FOURTH LINK

I

Yashka did not spend that night at home. People said that he and Steshka had sat in Ognev's garden until dawn. On Whitsun morning Yegor Stepanovich himself saw Yashka, with a group of girls and boys, walking at Steshka's side to the Dolliny valley.

"That's how the youngsters behave these days," Shlenka said. "It's better not to talk about it. There's his mother crying her heart out at the window, and he doesn't care a scrap; as if she was a stranger, and not the mother who gave birth to him."

"You mind your own business." Yegor Stepanovich cut him short and went indoors.

Klunya, Yashka's mother, tall and thin as the pole at the well, was crying without tears; now and again she moaned, a dry, long-drawn sound, and Yegor Stepanovich, breathing deeply and noisily, strode up and down the room like a demented man.

"Stop it," he growled at Klunya every few minutes. "Stop that everlasting groaning. Will you stop whining, or won't you?"

Wearily the days crawled by, monotonous and grey. Yegor Stepanovich spent his time in the stables, sitting on a bench, and burrowing in his thoughts like a chicken in a dry dung-heap, for hours on end. What an empty, senseless heap it was. . . . And, above all, the shame of it would never be forgotten in the village; his only son, unmarried, had run away from home.

"And how! . . . The ruffian! Your father worked hard all his life to make a good life for you. And you—look at you. You spite your own father: 'Look, I'm walking by your house, but I won't come in. Even if I saw you sweating blood, I'd still pass by.' "

Often at night Yegor Stepanovich would slip down from his bunk, press his face to the window, and stare for hours

into the darkness of the street, listening for the latch of the gate to click, for Yashka's familiar voice at the door. . . .

"Ah," he groaned. "What's it all about? Why did it happen?"

Gradually his anger died away, as a stream returns to its natural bed after the waters have subsided, and regret took its place. He did not speak to Klunya of his sorrow, but to himself he repeated, more and more frequently:

"It's a pity. . . . A piece of myself has been torn away. . . . If he was a stranger. . . . But he's my own flesh and blood."

He called Shlenka and whispered to him:

"Find out where he is, my friend. . . ."

"Why should I find out? I know already. He goes about with that stranger who wears glasses, they knock about the streets together, like homeless dogs, and at night he's at Steshka's."

Chukhliav pushed Shlenka aside, restraining his tears, and went indoors. Crumpled up in despair, he lay on his bunk like a beetle in a crack, groaning and turning from side to side. Later he got down, dressed himself quietly, and went out into the dark night.

2

A stranger had turned up in Shirokoye: a tall, spectacled man with a hanging lower lip, wearing big army boots. His cap was drawn low over his head, so that the peak touched the glittering rim of his spectacles; from early morning until late night he lounged about the streets of Shirokoye, smiling to the passers-by, and talking to everybody whom he met as if he were an old acquaintance, and to the question: "Where do you come from?" he invariably answered, "Oh, a long way off. How are things with you here?"

"Well, so-so, you mustn't grumble," the peasants answered. "It can't be compared with how it used to be. . . ."

Frequently he stopped by Shlenka's hut, or wandered along the banks of the Alai, watching Kirka Zhdarkin, alone and sweating, uprooting stumps on his piece of land. Once he spoke to Kirka. But Kirka felt a certain strangeness in this spectacled man and tried to shake him off as quickly as possible. The stranger wrote in his little yellow notebook: "Kirill Zhdarkin is an interesting figure. He was a hero at

the front, has recently returned to the village, and wants to be a hero in the village. The Red Army has given strong and capable workers to the villages."

A few days before Whitsun he had called on Zakhar Kataev, accompanied by Ognev, Fedunov, Pyriakin and Panov. That night the lamp burned in Zakhar's hut until dawn, and shadows moved over the walls. The people of Shirokoye were curious and excited, and gave their opinions and suggestions as to who the stranger might be, while those who had been at Zakhar's house that night, when questioned about his identity, remained obstinately silent or answered laughingly:

"You'll soon see. . . . He'll show you who he is."

"So he is running round with him, with those group men," Yegor Stepanovich decided, and went to Fedunov's hut, his felt boots shuffling softly over the dry ground.

It was quiet and dark at Fedunov's hut; now and again a chicken cackled hoarsely in the shed.

"The chicken's sick," Yegor Stepanovich thought. "And they're all asleep. He's not here, I'd better go to Stepan Ognev."

He turned into the lane, intending to cross the hemp-field and reach Ognev's hut from the back. But at the corner he heard voices. It annoyed him.

"Damn them, they'll see me. . . . You can't put a blanket over their eyes."

Hurriedly he turned back. From the fence came a young, familiar voice speaking rapidly. Yegor Stepanovich listened, stretching out his neck like a horse after food and staring intently; not far from him Yashka was leaning against the fence, holding Steshka closely to his side.

"No, don't you think it," she whispered, and laughed softly. "He won't let me in, your old bear of a father; he won't let me step over the door."

"You know what the law says nowadays," boomed the young bass in return. "He can't play us any tricks now."

Chukhliav lost his breath, as if a rope had been drawn tightly round his chest. At last he managed to regain his breath, and wanted to shout, but only a menacing hiss came:

"Yashka, you son of a bitch."

At the fence the laughter died away. Yegor Stepanovich's voice frightened the gay young voices into silence. Two shadows moved over the ground, caressing it lightly—as

Grandmother pats freshly baked cakes when she takes them out of the oven—and vanished in the darkness. Swaying and moving his arms, Yegor Stepanovich staggered homewards. The whole night he lay on his bunk groaning and rubbing his trembling legs.

In the morning he harnessed a pair of horses, drove to his piece of land by the spring and muttered as he went:

"We'll see, you son of a bitch. You'll sing another song later on. . . . Wait till I set about you; you just give me time and you'll see. . . . You went away, but other people will come. Ilya Maximovich and I will work together. With God's help Ilya will get better, and then we'll see. . . ."

3

Obstinately, Ilya Maximovich shook off his illness. True, all his body was covered with sores. They appeared on his neck, feet and back, and ripened like poppy-heads.

"That's nothing," he said. "Nobody ever died from sores. If only my inside was in order. . . . It was all dried up, but now it's getting a bit better."

That morning he felt quite well. He got up before everybody else in the house, went to the threshing-ground and sat on the rotted stump of a tree by the corn-kiln. The kiln was broken in several places, and there seemed some kind of likeness between it and the man. The tree stump smelt of medicine, as though it had been lying in a hospital. A sheaf of greyish-blue rye had been flung down near some straw and a flock of pigeons settled on the husks.

Ilya Maximovich was also interested in the spectacled man. "They say he pokes his nose in everywhere and writes things down in a notebook. But what does he write?"

He thought of Karasyuk and remembered the list. His heart beat quickly.

"Oh no." He waved the thought aside. "It's nothing to do with me. Who can prove anything? Karasyuk stopped Pchelkin's mouth. It isn't worth thinking about. . . . I must hurry up and get stronger on my legs. When I get better I'll set about things in another way."

He stood up and looked at the broken corn-kiln.

"What a state you've got into without the master's eye to take care of things," he said with a smile. "Well now, we must both hurry up and get better."

Manafa appeared at the fence. He lived in Siava, two *versts* from Shirokoye, and during Plakushchev's illness he had cut a path over the threshing-ground. Now his thin, feeble hands gripped the oaken posts of the fence; he stood motionless. Muttering to himself, Ilya Maximovich cleared away the rotted straw. Under the homespun shirt his shoulder-blades moved like the blades of oars; steam rose from him as from a horse after a furious gallop. Manafa shrank and looked back. To reach Shirokoye he would have to walk back for about half a *verst*, and then take the main road or the path that led over the oat and wheat fields. Neither alternative seemed particularly pleasant to Manafa. For a few moments he wavered, irresolute; then he stepped forward, like an earthworm cut in two.

"Ilya Maximovich! How is your health to-day? I haven't seen you for a long time. I saw you here on the threshing-ground, so I just stopped to ask you how you are . . . and look! Some devil or other has made a path over your ground."

Ilya Maximovich straightened himself and smiled.

"Good day, Afanasy Markelovich. Come along this way. The path's been made already, and I don't suppose we'll find out who did it."

"Look how the rascals have broken the fence," Manafa muttered crossly as he clambered over it. He shook the posts. "Some devil put them up to it."

Ilya Maximovich wiped his hands on his shirt and shook hands with Manafa.

"How your illness has changed you!"

"Yes, you see I'm all in a sweat," Plakushchev answered, raising an arm to show his wet armpit. "But now, thank God——"

Manafa squatted besides Plakushchev and took two cigarettes from his pockets.

"Have a cigarette."

"Oh, I don't smoke." Ilya Maximovich smiled.

"Try one, just the same." Manafa thrust one into his hand. "How long is it since you've seen one?"

The smoke from the two cigarettes rose in the air, a transparent thread, clinging to the walls of the barn and the thatched roof, and dispersed.

"How did you manage to get hold of cigarettes?"

Manafa waved off a fly that settled on his shoulder; uneasily he followed its flight.

"Oh, well, that man, the one with goggles, gave them to me. He came to the Soviet yesterday and gave me about ten. . . ."

"You're lying," Ilya Maximovich thought. "Well, carry on with your lies."

" 'You,' he says to me, 'you're secretary, you can't smoke this muck'—that's what he calls our tobacco—'here you are, have these cigarettes.' "

"But who is he? Do tell me, for goodness' sake."

"Well, I'll tell you, but mind, only you; don't let it get any farther. He's from the capital. He's a big bug: he's got power over the whole district. . . . Look, there he is."

"Ah!" Ilya Maximovich drawled softly.

4

The spectacled man (Secretary to the District Party Committee, otherwise Alexander Yakovlevich Zharkov, former school-teacher and member of the Party during its period of illegality), accompanied by Fedunov, was making a tour of inspection of the fields. When they had finished they sat down on the bank beyond the threshing-ground.

Before them, soft in the morning mist, the village of Shirokoye lay scattered across the Krapivny valley, whose slopes were furrowed by the channels made during the melting of the snows. Manure heaps dotted its sides, like sheep at pasture, and on the hill beyond four windmills swayed their arms lazily. The whole picture made Zharkov feel terribly depressed.

"Our villages are backward, they're still in darkness," Fedunov said rapidly. "Look! This manure is golden food for the soil, and they waste it. They throw it away in the ditches, and their fields are only a dozen yards off." He pointed to the allotments at the lower end of the valley. "And they grow pumpkins everywhere. In autumn everyone has about forty cartloads of them; in their stables and sheds—all pumpkins, and in winter they get rotten and then they're thrown away. Wouldn't it be better if they grew some beetroots. . . . It would be so useful, and it isn't very hard. . . ."

Fedunov's reasonable speech had begun to irritate Zharkov of late.

"Do you grow beetroots?"

The question was wholly unexpected. Fedunov was startled.

"No."

"Why not?"

"You see, it's very difficult . . . with these people. . . ."

"If it weren't difficult there'd be nothing for us to do about it."

"Yes, of course . . . you're quite right, we must be the first." Fedunov blinked. "It's all a matter of habit. . . . Well, I must go; the fields won't wait."

Judging by the bent back, and by the gesture with which Fedunov clasped his hands behind his back, Zharkov realised that he was annoyed and, from that morning, Zharkov disliked Fedunov as a mother would dislike a strange, diseased child.

"There's nothing in him besides village idiotism," he thought, getting up. "Everything about him conforms to type, the old type of peasant. And we want to reconstruct the villages with such people. Look at Chukhliav. It's true he's as stingy and greedy as a hungry dog, but for all that he's got a good head. . . . Or Zakhar——"

Crossing the stony ditch, he saw Plakushchev on his threshing-ground. He felt pleased and quickly crossed the potato-field that separated them. Behind the fence he caught sight of Manafa; Ilya Maximovich stood up to meet him.

"Good morning." He stopped. "Maxim Ilyitch, I think?"

"Ilya Maximovich. Good morning," Plakushchev said, drawing in his breath with a whistling sound, and restraining a shiver. "So you've come to our neighbourhood to see how we're getting on round here. We're as busy as beetles in a dirty corner."

Perhaps it was because the windmills and the neglected fields of Shirokoye had depressed Zharkov, but he welcomed Plakushchev's words like a breath of fresh air. For the second time he shook Plakushchev's hand heartily.

"Well, how's the world treating you, Ilya Maximovich? They say Karasyuk gave you a rough time. Just look what he did to your beard."

"Don't talk about my beard." Plakushchev frowned. "As long as my head's on my shoulders I'm all right. I'm getting along so-so, not so good, not so bad."

"I expect that you're a bit sorry that they took your land away."

"Are you mocking me? Why do you ask that?"

"Why—what's the matter?"

Ilya Maximovich was silent for a while, shuffling his feet among the rubbish on the ground. Then he sighed deeply and looked beyond Zharkov.

"Sorry? Of course I'm sorry. Suppose they took away your shirt, wouldn't you be sorry? That's how it is. But what can a man do about it? You can't knock your head against a stone wall. If the people want it that way, you have to fall in."

Plakushchev looked attentively at Zharkov. He noticed that the other was interested. After a short silence he continued, moving his dry, knotted hands:

"Think how we used to live. . . . We had a landlord, Sutiagin, a good-for-nothing. He wanted to tear the skin off our backs. Well, but I know how to manage my affairs. . . . I got the better of the gentry. One day the landlord sent his servant to call me, and I knew he was in need of money, because he wanted to join a woman in some other country. He had about a hundred women, and he squandered all his property for them, and he was left a cripple. So he sent for me. I was the village elder at that time and I polished up my patched boots with tar, so he could see what peasants live like, and as soon as I got to his mansion"—Plakushchev paused, and laughed softly—"even I smelt the difference. Sutiagin came in and at once he puts his handkerchief to his nose, and he calls out: 'Vasska, Vasska, take him away, he stinks!' But I said to him: 'You want money, and I've brought it.' 'Come here!' he shouts quickly, and took me into his room and we sat down. I thought I would get as much out of him as I could, because every rouble there meant a drop of my blood. 'Well,' I says to him, 'I'm quite willing to help you, and I trust you as I trust God, only, so as not to have to remind you, and make your house smell again, give me security on your oats. And if by spring—of course, I believe in you as I believe in Christ—but if by spring-time you have not paid me back, I'll be obliged to sell your oats.' Well, he got on the high horse. He was a hot-tempered man, and he shouts, 'Vasska, take him away!' So I put the money on the table and started counting, and he got quiet and told Vasska to write the note. And I gave him fifteen hundred roubles for three thousand puds of oats—that was the price then—and in the spring I sold the oats

at a rouble a pud; so I cleared fifteen hundred in one go."

He was silent. In the distance frogs croaked, a cock crowed, and a woman's clear voice was carried over the fields. Plakushchev sighed.

"Yes! I spent all my strength, and then——" He turned to Zharkov, and looked at him with kind, childish eyes. "So I spent all my life and strength. . . . It's not the land so much I'm sorry about, but all the time and strength I wasted. If I could knock off about fifteen years——" He threw away the dead-end of the cigarette. "That's what I'm sorry about, but now it's too late."

Zharkov pulled himself together.

"Oh, you've got plenty of strength left. Only,"—he put his glasses straight, as if to see Plakushchev better—"only you must think things over and learn to live the new way."

"Think things over? I've done that all right. But, you know, if a man's been caught stealing, he's a thief for ever after, and everybody points to him as soon as there's trouble, although it wasn't his fault. And I——" He laughed quietly and stretched out his arms. "No, no."

"That's not so, Ilya Maximovich." Zharkov took out his notebook and made an entry, feeling that he was growing to like Plakushchev more and more. Suddenly he began to question Plakushchev about Fedunov.

"What about him? There's nothing to say. He works and works. As the people say, neither a candle for God nor a stick for the devil." He laughed. "And then you must remember he's got enough business of his own to attend to. He's got enough land for three men, and he takes more from others. Well, why shouldn't he? He's got the power all right." He glanced quickly at Zharkov and, observing the latter's interest, continued: "He's got enough land to keep sixteen people busy, so he hasn't got any time to waste in the Soviet. His father, old Maxim, he's too old for work now."

"How's that? Does he rent some land?"

"Rent it? He just takes it, and that's all. How do you think he manages to keep racing horses? He grabs everything he can lay his hands on." Plakushchev kicked aside the heap of husks and asked Zharkov to sit down. Seating himself on a low hummock on the ground, he continued: "In my opinion what we want is a poor peasant in the Soviet, somebody like Kirka Zhdarkin or Shlenka."

"Who's Shlenka?"

Plakushchev laughed and shook his head. "I'll talk openly with you, as I would with anyone else. Don't you know Shlenka? His hut is at the corner of Burdiashka street—it will fall to pieces soon."

"Oh yes, I know, I know. But he's so foolish, so bad at his work."

"No, he's got a good head, but he's always had trouble. He just wants a little backing, and then he gets along fine. If they took off your trousers and turned you out into the street, how would you get along?"

"He's always talking of shirts and trousers, but I like him," Zharkov thought, more and more attracted by his companion.

"It's true he's got a poor old horse, but it's sick. It's never had enough food, and it can't run properly. But he hasn't got a plough, and he hasn't got any harness. He's got nothing to hold on to."

Zharkov looked quickly and attentively at Plakushchev. "He speaks to the point, but isn't he lying? I'll have to find out. . . . And what about Chukhliav?" he asked, looking the other straight in the eyes.

"Chukhliav? Yegor Stepanovich? Well, what shall I say? Supposing, for instance, a man got used to crossing himself with the right hand; well then, he'd find it hard to do it with his left. . . . But otherwise he's got a good head, that peasant. . . ."

5

Whistling gaily, Yegor Stepanovich ploughed his field. His dry muscles grew easier from the exercise, and pleasant shivers ran over his body.

"Hallo, you back at work? Did you get tired of sitting at home?" cried the peasants who passed by.

"Yes, I missed it. I missed the ploughing," he answered. "My bones got stiff; it does them good to be moving." And then jokingly: "Look out, your wheels are going round."

He began to hum a song—"How the soldier went to war." He sang very rarely, only at moments of the greatest success. He felt that he was successful; he was ploughing, ploughing all by himself. At first, when he had led the horses out of the stable, his hands had trembled in excitement.

"Perhaps I can't plough any more. Have I forgotten? If I have, then my shame will live for ever in the village."

But the plough ran on; and how well it ran! So Yegor Stepanovich sang and thought:

"That's how we'll work. . . . And no strangers will have to feed me. Strangers always want to get something out of you. And if a time comes when you've got nothing to eat, they'll beat you down till you sweat blood."

Chukhliav ploughed, and the peasants of Shirokoye ploughed. Their grey, bent figures were dotted all over the land, and the straining, sweating horses dragged the ploughs and the children ran with pitchers to the spring to get water.

The sun climbed over the hills and a rosy mist quivered over the fields. The cries of the peasants grew fainter, the children's laughter died away and the horses dragged the ploughs more wearily.

Suddenly a swarm of horse-flies appeared and settled on Chukhliav's horses. The animals jerked their tired heads, swished their tails and stamped. They stopped in the furrow, stamping and shaking their heads.

"Where the devil have they come from? Who the devil wants them?" Yegor Stepanovich groaned.

For a while he tried to drive the insects off the horses' backs with his whip; then he pulled off his jacket and waved it about. The flies buzzed angrily like a disturbed beehive and attacked the horses more vigorously. The brown mare kicked with her hind-legs, throwing clods of earth into Yegor Stepanovich's face. Streams of sweat ran down Chukhliav's thin body, his face wrinkled in fury.

"What can I do? The damned cursed little devils. . . ." Yegor Stepanovich himself was amazed at the volley of curses that fell from his lips.

"Unharness, unharness, Yegor Stepanovich!" Chizhik shouted.

"Take your mid-day rest now," several other peasants added.

"You won't get rid of the flies now."

"Wait until the heat is over."

"Yes, yes, all right," Yegor Stepanovich answered and quickly unharnessed the horses. He led the brown mare out of the shafts to the cart by the tree. Then he brought the second horse. The swarm of swollen horseflies started up, circled in the air for a moment or two, and then settled on

the mare's stomach. The horse trembled, threw up her hind-legs and bounded across the field. Reaching the unploughed part she stopped and began to graze.

"She'll run away, damn her!" Yegor Stepanovich thought and, stretching out his hand and beckoning, he called affectionately: "Well, what's the matter, what's the matter? Come along now, come along. You'll have your food in a minute, or do you like those weeds better?"

The horse snorted, waved her tail and trotted off in the direction of the Dolliny valley; after a while she turned and made for the small birch-wood.

"The beast, the old witch. Yashka's spoilt her. That Yashka! She wouldn't have run away if I'd had the training of her. I'd——" He did not finish the sentence, but ran towards the wood, and heard the peasants shouting advice to him as he ran. He felt rather flattered.

"Don't frighten her, don't frighten her, Yegor Stepanovich!"

"Go up quietly, pretend you're not after her."

"Now! Do it quickly!"

"Get hold of her fast!"

"Go round by the bushes, she won't see you."

"No, no! Go from the front, Yegor Stepanovich, from the front!"

Yegor Stepanovich jumped over the ditch and followed the horse across the meadow.

"Come along, my dear, come along," he whispered, and approached the horse sideways, carefully, as if he were faced with a barbed-wire fence.

The mare flattened her ears, trembled, and galloped away towards Brusski.

6

On Brusski, Yashka Chukhliav and Zharkov were sitting by some stunted birch trees above the river-bank. Below them stretched the Volga, rocking in its sunny cradle. Behind the birch trees, the members of the fellowship were digging the ground.

"Well,"—Zharkov played with the cap which rested on his knees—"we're wastrels; we waste our time right and left, like drunkards squander their money. Look at yourself, for example, you're young and strong, and you live, so I'm told, like a crazy rascal."

Zharkov stopped: in the green of the birches a pair of naked, muscular girl's legs had appeared. For a while he watched them twinkling among the bushes, then the birch copse quivered and Steshka stepped out on to the river-bank not far from the two men. The wind ruffled her short skirt, and the faded blue blouse clung tightly to her back and breast. It was clear that Steshka had long outgrown the blouse; one sleeve had split, exposing part of her shoulder.

"What a healthy girl she is," Zharkov thought, watching with admiration Steshka's quick and skilful movements as she rinsed the dinner-pail.

"Whose is she?"

"Who?" Yashka was roused from his reflections.

"That girl over there."

"Oh, Steshka? Stepan Ognev's daughter."

Zharkov visualised the dry, pale faces of the women in the big, stone town. Involuntarily he thought of his own wife, short, round-shouldered, always rushing off somewhere with a bundle of papers under her arm. His thoughts leapt forward, and a mist clouded his eyes.

"Whew!" he whistled, and spoke to Yashka in order to avoid the necessity of comparison: "You ought to go away and learn something, Yashka. You can smoke herrings, but you can't smoke the sky. Why do you waste your time?"

"Oh, my goodness!" Steshka clapped her hands. "Look, Yashka; look at your father!"

Galloping towards Brusski, leaping over ditches and fences, ran the brown mare. Behind her, pouring with sweat, ran Yegor Stepanovich.

Yashka dashed towards the horse.

"Whoa, there!" Ognev shouted. "Stop, Yashka, let's see your father catch it!"

"Go on, Yegor Stepanovich," Nikolai cried. "You're a specialist at this sort of business; you taught me lots of things."

"What are you standing there like a dummy for?" Yegor Stepanovich shouted to Yashka. "Or is it a stranger's horse in the field? Catch her!"

"Catch her? I didn't let her loose!"

"Swine!" Yegor Stepanovich howled, and moved towards the horse as quietly as if her were approaching a bird that he did not want to frighten away.

"Go on, Yashka, catch her," Steshka whispered. "Look, his eyes will fall out!"

"Well, you try, we'll watch."

"You are wicked," Steshka smiled.

"I'm not wicked."

"Stop, stop, my dear, my little dove," Yegor Stepanovich murmured. "All right, you all laugh. I'm trying to catch a horse, and that's something at least. You only try to catch fleas—that's all you're good for."

The horse sprang aside, shuddered, stamped her feet, and ran towards the birch copse.

Ognev laughed: "At least, if we do hunt fleas, we catch them; and look at you. . . ."

For a long time Yegor Stepanovich followed the horse from the copse to the hill. Once the animal came quite close to Nikolai's cow; it would have been quite easy for Nikolai to stretch out his hand and seize the runaway.

"Catch her, catch her! What are you fooling about for?" Yegor Stepanovich burst out furiously.

"Hop it, off you go!" Nikolai pushed the mare away.

The peasants laughed. Davidka Panov, scratching his bald head, his bow legs planted wide apart, called out:

"It's your fate you're running after, Yegor Stepanovich. Go on, catch her!"

Yegor Stepanovich's legs ached, his throat was dry with dust, and in his heart, as water rises in a lock when the sluice-gates have been closed, rose anger; anger because of the horse, because of Yashka, because of those beggars, anger with himself.

"I ought to let her go on running; she'd come home by herself. Now I've only made a fool of myself. Idiot! I ought to have known better."

"Well, what are you making fun of him for?" Steshka cried and ran, her round hips swaying, towards the birch copse. She caught the horse's mane with her left hand.

"Keep still, young gallivanter!"

Steshka wound the reins round her right arm. The horse jerked backwards, then stretched her head forwards and rubbed her mouth against Steshka's breast.

"Well, here you are, Yegor Stepanovich," Steshka called out clearly.

"Take it, and in future don't talk so much nonsense about fleas," Ognev said.

"You have to learn how to catch fleas as well," Nikolai laughed.

"Yegor Stepanovich, it was Steshka caught your fate for you. . . . Don't you forget that." Davidka slapped Chukhliav's shoulder and looked towards Yashka and Steshka.

7

Depressed by the laughter of the fellowship and by Davidka's hint, Yegor Stepanovich lay down by his cart, watching the peasants tracing their furrows, the horses twitching under the attacks of the flies. He was deeply mortified.

At evening he harnessed the horses and in the twilight set out for home. He brought some dry straw to the animals, threatened to sell the mare immediately, and went indoors.

Ilya Maximovich was waiting for him. After the conversation with Zharkov he had made up his mind that Fedunov must be deprived of his post as Soviet chairman and replaced by somebody "on our side, somebody who will do what we say." He had discussed the matter with Gurianov and his nephew, Kirka Zhdarkin. He had visited the latter on his swampy piece of land. From some distance off, shaking his head in wonderment, he called out:

"Oh, heavens! Kirill Senafontich! What labour you're putting into it. . . . So there's people like you, too, among the Sovietists. And I must confess, I thought you were only an expert at talking and eating soup. Look what a lot he's done. It wouldn't be bad if everybody did the same—and they will too, the devil take them," he added quietly. "They've just got to see what you've done here, and the whole bog will turn into a gold-mine."

Ilya Maximovich had approached Kirka the right way.

"Oh," Kirka thought, leaving his work. "Even he understands what I'm doing. Yes," he said aloud, "it's hard work here." He stretched out a hand to Plakushchev, but noticing that it was dirty, hid it behind his back.

"Come on, shake," Plakushchev said enthusiastically, gripping Kirka's dirty hand. "Let's make an alliance with the earth." With the other hand he rubbed the mud over their two clasped hands. "We ought to bind everybody together like this, with the earth."

He quite won Kirka's heart. Kirka spoke of the transformation of the village, urged Plakushchev to forget the old order, not to grumble and complain, but to give all his

strength and understanding to the people. Plakushchev agreed to everything, questioned Kirka, thumped his muddy fist on his forehead in affected astonishment, and it seemed to Kirka that he had won the other completely to his side. "And Ognev said," he thought, "that every man only looks out for himself. All we have to do is not to chase people away."

He confided his thoughts to Plakushchev.

"He's still an infant," Ilya Maximovich thought, but he agreed to everything that Kirka said, and, for his own part, added: "It isn't the Soviet power that chases people away, it's men themselves. Just look what Fedunov's done. He was on bad terms with his own father all his life, and now he's supposed to rule the people. Now, if you were head of the village——"

Kirka would not hear of it. He wanted to do his work on the land. But he raised no objection to Fedunov's removal.

Ilya Maximovich talked the matter over with his family, and then called on Yegor Stepanovich to discuss it further.

"Of course, he doesn't know about the trouble yet," Chukhliav thought. "He doesn't know that I've been made the laughing-stock of the whole village." He wrinkled his face bad-temperedly, as if a louse had bitten him in the presence of other people, when he could not scratch the spot concerned. "You starting on that again?" he said. "The other time they nearly tore your beard out. It's easy enough to lose your head in the twinkling of an eye."

"Don't flare up so," Plakushchev said quietly. "You said yourself that if you lose on tails, there's always heads underneath. And now's your opportunity."

"I'm against all this. We ought to keep out of it, we can do what we want in a roundabout way. See, I've tempted two away from Ognev already, and now I might try and manage Davidka. . . . I've heard he's got as much flour left as an oak's got fruit. . . . There's our chance to promise him something, and when he's gone Ognev himself might give in. That's what I think, Ilya Maximovich. But we ought not to put our noses in there . . . it isn't our business."

"So you want to work like a mole? Well, go on burrowing. It won't interfere with us. But all the same, we'll get our own chairman, and it won't take long before we've got the majority. Do you know what we'll be able to do here?

One, two, three, and they'll be cleared off of Brusski, or we'll tax them so heavily that they'll have to sell their breeches. Only who shall we choose? Shlenka? He'd do in one way, only he takes too much notice of what people say. Think it over."

"No, don't mix me up in this business. And leave Shlenka out of it too. . . . He's useful to me. But if anything happens, I'll help you."

So Ilya Maximovich pursued his objective alone. Round-shouldered, he crept from hut to hut, talking to the peasants in the evening, of this and that, now and then cautiously introducing a word or two about Fedunov. Very soon the whole of Krivaya street was determined that Fedunov should be replaced by another chairman. Why? Well, he's had the job too long, and anyway . . . perhaps if he went things would change, the day would dawn with a brighter light. The matter was taken up very zealously by the brothers Gurianov, Kuzmich, the river watchman, and Kirka Zhdarkin.

And the fight began.

Zharkov allowed it to take its own course.

Before he came to the Alai district he knew village life only by hearsay, by the reports of village delegates at conferences, by casual conversations with different peasants. He always imagined a village as a large, dark lump divided into three sections: the poor peasants, the middle peasants and the rich peasants, the Kulaks. The Kulak had a big head and wore leather boots; the middle peasant had ordinary boots and wore a jacket; and the poor peasant ran about in bast shoes.

That, at least, was how villages were depicted on posters, and that was how Zharkov thought of them: on the one side the enemy of the revolution, the Kulak; on the other side, the defender of the revolution, the poor peasant, while the middle peasant stood aside, biting his lips. But after he had lived in Shirokoye a few days, all his ideas and impressions grew blurred and confused, and when he came across such poor peasants as Petka Kudeyarov, Mitka Spirin and Shlenka, doubts were born in him.

"If this is really village poverty,' he wrote in his notebook, "then we are building our village policy on sand."

On the other hand, Stepan Ognev, Davidka Panov and some other poor peasants shook his new conviction, and

Zakhar Kataev and Ilya Maximovich Plakushchev completed his bewilderment. What astonished him most of all was the realisation that it was not the poor who held the leadership of the village, but such strong individuals as Kataev and Plakushchev.

"There's one thing I can't understand," he said to Ognev. "Why does Zakhar Kataev shake his head if I start talking about Plakushchev?"

"It takes a lot to move you. Now you've decided to make Shlenka chairman—it's enough to make the pigs laugh. . . . Well, all right, let's look at Shlenka. If it depended on me, I wouldn't let him come near the Soviet."

"But he's a poor peasant," Zharkov tried to persuade Ognev, although he had no faith in his own argument. "Poverty has crushed him. If he had a good holding, he wouldn't be any worse than Zakhar. I've seen that sort of thing often. You all think Chukhliav good at his work, but when he started again, he let the horse run away."

"A good holding? That takes so much work that you get a hump on your back. Pies don't fall out of the sky, and Shlenka sits all day at his gate and stares about him like a vulture who wants to get his claws into something."

"And you? You haven't got a hump, and you've got nothing."

Ognev grew pale.

At the next district meeting of the Party, Zharkov gave a report on his impressions of the district. He proposed that there should be new elections in all the village Soviets and to the District Executive Committee. He pointed out that Shirokoye was ruled by its secretary, Manafa, and that the new elections should take place there first of all. Casually, he threw in a word about Shlenka. He stated that in his opinion it was essential that not only poor peasants should be elected to the Soviets, but also those who managed their holdings well and were capable of understanding and applying Soviet policy.

His remarks were unexpected and the Communists were silent, but it seemed to Zharkov that they understood him and shared his opinion. At least the chairman, Kuzmarkin, nodded his head all the time as if in agreement, but when Zharkov was drawing to an end, enumerating the conclusions to be drawn from his statements, Ognev jumped up and cried:

"Why not Migunchik? Why not have the speculators in the Soviets?"

"Comrade Ognev is going too far," Zharkov answered.

"It's Zharkov who isn't going far enough."

"And in any case," Zharkov continued smoothly and coldly, "Migunchik isn't a fool. He's got initiative, and if he came over to our side he'd be very useful to us on the Co-operative Council."

"If wolves turned into sheep, they wouldn't be called wolves," Ognev shouted.

"I don't understand you"—Zharkov turned to him.

Leaving his place without waiting until it was his turn Ognev began to speak, frowning and staring at the floor as if everything that he wished to say were written there.

"It's all very well to put nettles on someone's chair, but Comrade Zharkov wants us to wear shirts made of nettles."

This infuriated Zharkov. He felt like a man who has been led from darkness into a brightly illuminated hall. Trembling, he shouted:

"Chairman, call him to order!"

"Yes, oh damn, look here, Comrade Ognev, it isn't your turn to speak," Kuzmarkin said. "Go on speaking, Comrade Zharkov!"

"I'm used to speaking when I want to," Ognev said, and left the meeting.

After Ognev's departure Zharkov continued to prove his arguments, but he saw that, although all the Communists were silent, they were wholly on Ognev's side. It was true that they agreed unanimously to Zharkov's proposals, but that was far from enough. Zharkov feared that Ognev might find another way of upsetting all his plans. He decided to get Ognev out of the district for a while. The following morning he called Ognev to his office, wrote a letter to the Regional Committee and said to Stepan:

"Well, my friend, you can't build Socialism with a stick. You're capable fellows, and you stand pretty strong on your own legs, so I've written a letter that you should be given three horses on credit."

"Perhaps he's right, perhaps we really ought to have Plakushchev in the village Soviet. . . . After all, they had specialists in the army. Only it will take him a good time to get into the right state of mind," Ognev thought, guessing that they were trying to get him out of the way. "Good,

I'll go," he answered. "If we get a pair of horses the work will get along much quicker. And if you come back in three years' time, you won't recognise the place."

Two weeks had passed since Ognev left for the town.

Zharkov walked across the Krapivny valley to the village Soviet election meeting. He knew that the village was divided into two camps: one led by Plakushchev, the other by Kataev. Zharkov expected a stormy meeting. The previous evening he had tried to reconcile Kataev and Plakushchev, but both the one and the other shrugged his shoulders, smiled and said that they were quite friendly towards each other, that in all their lives "no black cat had run between them." There was no need for Zharkov to worry, there was no animosity anywhere.

In despair, Zharkov also shrugged his shoulders. It was impossible to do anything by persuasion.

8

Flicking a husk of grain from his coat, Ilya Maximovich rose from the bench and turned to his wife, Elizaveta.

"Look here, you, take care of the house."

"What about me? Why shouldn't I go also?"

"You've got no business there."

He went off to the village Soviet, followed by several men from the Krivaya street.

"Well, come along," they cried. "Let's all keep together."

"Grusha," Elena Sprina called, tapping at Ognev's window. "Let's go together. I don't like going alone."

"Come in," Grusha answered. "Come in for a bit."

"Look what a mess. Ilya Maximovich says that everybody must go, old and young." Elena put Volodka, her two-year-old son, down on the floor, and laughed. "He says everyone must go, but what are we going for?"

At the sight of Volodka, joy fluttered in Steshka's heart like leaves on the apple trees on a still morning. "Darling," she said softly, lifting the child and pressing him to her. "My little dollie."

Volodka stared at her and stretched out his plump arms to his mother, smacking his lips.

"I don't think!" Elena laughed. "Wait till you have one of your own. You won't call him such pet names. All right, you silly girl, there's nothing to flare up about."

"Wait till you're a bit older; the years are getting on," Grusha said. "Where are you going, Steshenka?"

"I'll be back . . . soon."

Steshka crossed the yard to the back of the hut and ran over the hemp-field. She sat down under a tree beyond the threshing-ground. Her heart was beating rapidly.

"I'll also have a baby, and I'll call him—what shall I call him? I don't know——" She covered her face with her hands. Her cheeks were burning, and her body swayed like wheat in the field.

"I'll tell him to-day," she whispered to herself. "I'll call him aside, and I must tell him that it's time to send the marriage-makers . . . or else everybody will know my shame, and they'll laugh at me. Or perhaps there isn't anything. . . . And perhaps there is."

Steshka wanted and yet did not want this "anything." She was certain of only one thing, that now she could not call her sweetheart Yashka any more; she must call him Yasha. She knew, too, that Yashka's chest was broad, like the big sledge, and his arms were strong. With such arms one need not fear; one can live well.

"You can't get lost with him, he's too strong. He just took me in his arms that time and carried me off."

She uttered a soft exclamation and shuddered. She could not remember how it had happened. But yes, she did know. On Whitsunday they had all gathered together in the Dolliny valley, singing their songs in chorus and dancing to the music of a harmonica. Peka Kataev played the harmonica. He played for Steshka, and Steshka danced, her back bent like a spring.

"She's a fine girl, Steshka," Peka thought, drawing his instrument wider.

And at the height of their play, when the girls and boys were dancing like whirlwinds, Yashka's powerful young voice, coming from the pine-wood, cut the air like a whip. Steshka was the first to stop. She pulled Elena with her into the bushes. . . . Afterwards she sat at Yashka's side under a hazel tree. Night was falling over the valley which echoed to the song of young people. Yashka drew her to him and kissed her. She laughed, crying like a plover, and trembled.

"What a strong chest you've got? It is strong, isn't it?" She slipped her hand through the open collar of his shirt.

To Yashka it seemed that a piece of white-hot metal had touched him.

"Ah, you——"

The scent of rye came from the threshing-ground; from beyond the hemp-field came the uncertain lowing of a new-born calf. . . . Steshka dropped her head on her knees, her body swaying. Large tears fell on her knees, making small, damp patches.

"Oh, so here you are," Yashka called from the fence. "I was at your house, and I asked your mother: 'I say, where's Steshka?' 'She's run off, did you ever!' says she."

He jumped over the fence and Steshka wriggled in his powerful arms.

"Let me go, let me go! What are you doing? People will see us!"

"Well, that's what I want. Let them see. What's up? Have you been crying? What is there to cry about, eh? Stupid! You really are a silly thing."

The noise of the meeting reached them across the allotments and threshing-ground. Steshka stood up and smoothed her grey dress. Yashka looked at her large, moist eyes.

"Go on, wipe your eyes. You're going to be a mother. That's nothing to cry about. You're not alone, and I don't think you're a cry-baby."

"You—a father," Steshka laughed. "Some father!"

"Well, what about it?"

"I'm not crying because I'm sorry, Yashka, but because I'm happy."

Walking silently along the grassy, rutted road, they passed the threshing-ground and the allotments, and arrived at the village Soviet.

There was a sea of heads at the village Soviet. On the right stood the inhabitants of Krivaya. They were all there, men and women, young and old. Even the priest Kharlampy was there, his arms folded, his eyes fixed on the back of Kirka Zhdarkin's head.

On the left were the villagers from Zaovrazhenoye, mostly men and boys. Here and there, but very rarely, a woman's kerchief could be seen. At the table, in the porch of the Soviet house, Zharkov presided as chairman of the meeting. Zakhar Kataev was dozing at one side of him; Nikita Gurianov sat at the other side, his short, square-cut ginger beard turning from side to side. He seemed to be about to

throw himself on Fedunov any moment. The minutes book trembled in Fedunov's hands. He put it down and moved it from place to place, swallowing his words like an eel swallows frogs.

The peasants of Shirokoye listened quietly to his report, swaying slightly where they stood. In the back rows the people chattered softly.

"They're all here," Yashka whispered, and drew his companion to the left.

A soft murmur ran through the crowd. Yashka pushed himself to the front and looked at Plakushchev. Ilya Maximovich's eyes sparkled maliciously, his mouth was half open.

"And so, citizens, so I——" Fedunov wiped the sweat from his face.

"So, so, so," Kirka Zhdarkin remarked loudly.

Plakushchev turned towards Zhdarkin, whose words had shaken the Krivaya peasants to loud laughter. Zharkov banged the counting-frame on the table.

The laughter ceased.

"It's going to rain; it's very close," Grandfather Katai said, from the corner of the Soviet house.

"That would be good," Grandfather Maxim answered.

"Yes, we do need it," Katai agreed.

"Hi, you over there, have you started a meeting of your own?" Petka Kudeyarov called to them.

"The meeting's going peacefully," Zharkov thought, observing the peasants. It was the first time he had attended such a large peasants' meeting. He tried to examine each face, the characteristic feature of each peasant. His eyes rested a long time on Shlenka and Kirka Zhdarkin. When Yashka and Steshka joined the crowd, Zharkov stared at her —and then his eyes wandered over the other women.

"And so, as I haven't come quite prepared . . . we'll take questions." Fedunov was finished, and sat down on his chair.

"And so I'm not prepared," Kudeyarov mocked.

"We know what you've been preparing for."

"You managed to get a racing horse all right."

"We know all about that."

"I don't try to hide it from you," Fedunov shouted. "Everything's open at my house."

"Why are they so rough about it?" Zharkov thought. "They ought to go about it in a smoother way."

"All right, don't hide."

"Show us your cards."

"Comrades, you can't go on like this. You must put your questions in proper order."

"Well," Nikita Gurianov began, when the noise had quietened somewhat, "if he can't say anything, then it means—— If a horse isn't good for drawing the cart, send it to the slaughter-house."

"See!" Shlenka yelled. "He wanted to move mountains, and he can't lift a grain of corn. Some chairman!"

From the other side rang out Grigory Skulov's voice. "What's up? What do you want? Are you trying to be clever?"

"You're trying to be clever, you blockheads. You live a *verst* away: you don't have to see him every minute like we do. We've had enough of him, thank God!"

"Citizen comrades!" Manafa shrieked. He stopped short, frightened at his own voice, and continued in a lower key: "I have here,"—he waved a sheet of paper in the air— "I mean, we have here the report of the Enquiry Commission."

Plakushchev's eyes narrowed. Gurianov rapped his knuckles on the table.

"Carry on, read it out! "

"Come on, out with it!"

Manafa chanted: "Of such and such a date, that is, the Report of the Enquiry Commission, under the chairmanship of Zaichkin, president of the District Control Commission."

In astonishment, Fedunov stared at Manafa as if a two-year-old child had suddenly changed into a giant before his eyes. His hand tightly grasping the stair-rail, he hissed:

"Oh, you weathercock, you! "

"The chairman of the peasant Committee, Tarassov," Manafa continued, "and the chairman of the village Soviet, Fedunov, have borrowed from the barn of the village peasant committee"—Manafa drew in his lips for a moment —"twenty-seven puds of rye."

"Stop! Stop there!" Nikita Gurianov jumped up. "Do you see, citizens? Do you see where our good grain goes to? Do you see?"

The peasants of Krivaya became greatly excited.

"We've got nothing to eat, and he wants a fine horse."

"You scoundrels!"

"You rogue!" Fedunov flung at Manafa.

"Comrade citizens," Manafa shrieked. "My life is in danger! Now there's the Soviet power, and he plays the general."

"He's lying," Yashka cut in. "He's lying." The din ceased.

"That puppy," Plakushchev muttered. "His mother's milk isn't dry on his lips yet, and he——"

Yashka ran to the table and pushed Manafa aside.

"So that's it? We mustn't speak! We mustn't speak, mustn't we? Well, Ilya Maximovich, you've got a big head, but do you think we're tadpoles? You've made a big mistake if you do."

His words seemed to release the tongues and bodies of the Zaovrazhenoye villagers from a spell.

"The idiots!"

"Go for them!"

At the unexpected attack the Krivaya peasants were silent for a while. Then Shlenka darted forward, seized one of Skulov's legs and pulled him to the ground.

Uproar ensued. Shrieking and grinding their teeth, their thin faces burning, the group from Zaovrazhenoye fell upon their opponents. At first the latter retreated a few steps; then they advanced like a solid wall upon their attackers. Petka Kudeyarov threw his apron over his shoulder and wrenched a post from the stair rail; Alexis, Zakhar's son, seized Shlenka firmly and threw him back among the Krivaya peasants.

Zharkov kept his seat, bewildered. It seemed to him that he had lost control of himself as well as of the meeting. His tongue felt like a lump of wood in his mouth; his body seemed nailed to the bench. He was aware of only one thing, the peasant nature bursting through and submerging its barriers, drowning these thin, exhausted faces in blood. He sprang up and dashed into the crowd, which jostled him from side to side. At one moment his head appeared above the others, then it disappeared again among the grey cotton shirts, the waving arms and rough fists of the peasants.

He shouted, shaking the enraged peasants by the shoulder, but they only swore at him, and thrust him aside. Zharkov grew dizzy; in the whirling mass of faces that met his confused glance he distinguished Ilya Maximovich, standing calmly aside, with folded arms, watching the fight.

THE FIFTH LINK

I

The earth steamed gratefully after the rain. Drops of rain fell from the thatched roofs into the puddles. Chickens scratched among the warm, smoking dung-heaps. At the village Soviet, Shlenka sat at the table opposite Manafa, his pen scratching laboriously over the paper.

"What else?" he asked, looking up at Manafa.

"Have you put down the number of cows?"

"Yes."

"And horses?"

"And horses."

"It strikes me this is the tenth time this year we've put it all down," Manafa said, scratching his ear. "What else is there? Oh yes, they want to know about the masses. Write down: Our chief attention is paid to the masses and to the poor in general, and in general our attention is given to the conditions of citizens. Have you got that? Well, what else?"

"Shall we write about Brusski? Shall we let them know about this peasant co-operative in the village?"

"Brusski?" Manafa scratched his ear again and reflected. "They ought to know about it, but they'll say, well, why did you let it happen. It says in the minutes you gave it to them willingly. No, we can't go at it like that, not straight out. Look, here's Grishka back again. You get round him. Ilya Maximovich said we ought to get round him."

Grigory Skulov entered the village Soviet. His troubles were greater than the wide Volga steppes. Recently, driving through the forest, his cart had fallen into a swamp, and his horse was no longer fit for work. A report had been drawn up five days before, but no stamp had been affixed. Without the official stamp, of course, nobody would believe him, and he could get no assistance. He had come to Shlenka for the stamp.

"Oh, I am tired," Shlenka sighed. "What is it, Grigory Efimovich?"

Skulov wriggled in his chair, and stretched out the report.

"It only wants a little what do you call it?"

"What do you mean, a little what do you call it?"

"Stamp," Skulov corrected himself.

"Oh yes, in a minute. How is Zakhar getting on? Tell him to look in here. The District Executive Committee is asking urgently for his report," Shlenka said, searching for the stamp in his pocket. "Where the devil is that stamp, Manafa? You see, here's an important business, and my stamp's gone. Well, sit down, I won't be long."

"But I only want——" Skulov stammered. "This is the fifth day I've come about it."

"Well, if you've spent five days already, can't you wait a minute more? Sit down, here's my dispatch-case for security."

Shlenka pushed his case over to Skulov—it was a present from Manafa—and walked unhurriedly out of the Soviet. At first he made for the bath-house at the river Alai but, remembering something, stopped and turned sharply homewards.

At first it had seemed strange to Shlenka himself that he should be chairman of the village Soviet. More than once he recalled the events of the election meeting. The peasants from Siava had voted for their own candidate, the peasants of Zaovrazhenoye for theirs; Krivaya had voted for Shlenka. Siava had two votes, Zaovrazhenoye four, and Krivaya five. The other two districts rocked with laughter over the fact that Shlenka was the chief man in Shirokoye. But who didn't they laugh at? They'll soon get used to it. Even now many of them, who formerly would not have exchanged a word with Shlenka, took off their caps when they met him.

"That's because I've got the machine in my hands," he murmured, entering his hut. "Lukeria," he shouted, "give me dinner!"

"What?"

"Dinner, I said."

"Lord Jesus Christ!" Lukeria made the sign of the cross in front of him. "What is there for dinner? What are you talking about?"

"Have you eaten it all up?"

"Eaten it all up? If only there was something to eat!"

"As soon as I get my salary, we'll have to see about introducing dinner," Shlenka thought, climbing into the bunk.

"The horse is dying of starvation," Lukeria cried. "You're a fine chairman, you are."

"Well, what's up now? Am I a doctor? What can I do for her? Don't worry me now. The community needs my head now, and I've only got one, not a hundred."

He closed his eyes, and was almost asleep when somebody tapped a dirty, wrinkled hand on the window.

"Hallo, who else has the devil brought? Can't they leave a man in peace?"

"Hi! not so wild, you!" Lukeria cried. "You'll break the whole window."

"Vassili Yegorich! Yegorich!" a voice cried from the street. "You're the chairman now, aren't you? Come out here!"

Unwillingly Shlenka slipped down from the bunk and, scratching his side, walked barefooted into the street.

"Vassili Yegorich, little father." Akulina Chessalkina flew at him. "They'll kill me, they'll kill me."

"Wait a minute. What's the matter? I don't understand."

"He's a hound—a swine—a hound. He's quiet about it, but he's a hound. He stole my Austrian stilleto. And I said to him, you thief, you. And he says no, he says no. But he did. He stole my Austrian stilleto, and he threw it away somewhere."

"Who? Who is he?"

Akulina stared at Shlenka, her mouth open, her eyes protruding.

"But him, Nikolai." The tears came again. "Nikolai Pyriakin. He stole it. As God is my witness he did. You come along with me. Come on!"

Without waiting for Shlenka's assent, she ran off, shrieking, to her house.

"Business hours are over, citizen Chessalkina," Shlenka said, in measured tones, and walked slowly towards the bath-house.

When she reached her hut, Akulina looked back and stood still in astonishment, watching Shlenka's receding back. Then she waved her arms and shouted:

"Vassili Yegorich, you're the chairman, aren't you?"

Shlenka turned his head.

"Business hours, I told you, are over. We must get you used to order. You don't give a man any rest day or night. What am I? A rabbit?"

On the bank of the Alai he met Grusha Ogneva. Unwillingly, he raised his cap an inch or two in greeting.

"Tell Ognev he must appear at the Soviet. Say the chairman wants him."

Grusha replied that Ognev had not yet returned, and that she herself was waiting impatiently for him.

"That's nothing to do with us. We aren't interested in family affairs."

Restraining a smile, Grusha watched him walking down towards the baths.

"Hee, hee," Chukhliav laughed, coming up to her. "What a chairman we've got." He clapped his hands. "Eh, Grusha, when you were a girl you were all milk and roses."

Grusha laughed, and rubbed her mouth with the corner of her kerchief.

"I've had two children since then, don't forget, and brought them up, too. A bride and a bridegroom."

"Two? Others have seven, but they don't look like you. Look at you, you're as grey as the earth itself."

Together they walked up the path to the village: Yegor Stepanovich spoke of the crops, of the haymaking and the harvest.

"It will be harvest-time soon, and I've heard there won't be much to do in your field. It will be very hard to get through the winter."

"Of course it's hard," Grusha said, pulling the kerchief lower over her head.

After a short silence Yegor Stepanovich continued in a kindly voice: "It would be better to leave Brusski alone. It's really surprising. He's a clever man, but his actions wouldn't make you think so. Look here, it wouldn't be difficult for him to get a horse for himself. They'd give it to him; he's in their good books. He ought to work in with me, we'd get on fine together. And besides, my boy's running after your girl."

Grusha knew that Stepan always laughed at Chukhliav, and in general she avoided him; but now he spoke friendly words to her, which drew her to him. Even his queerly pointed head seemed to assume a rounder shape.

"He'll make the peasants angry," Chukhliav continued. "He'll stir up the hive, and they might set fire to your house. You'd better tell him to look out for that."

Walking hastily, Grusha climbed the hill, crossed the street and entered her hut. She sat by the window to patch Ognev's trousers. For a long time she stared out of the window across to the Balbashikha hills and thought :

"If Stepan takes the railway, he'll come by the hill, and if he gets the horse he'll come by the Volga."

She had been expecting Stepan the last four days. It was so long since he went, nearly three weeks, and she waited for him from day to day. He had not come, and Grusha was anxious. Her dream the previous night also worried her. She had dreamed that Stepan returned from town, clean-shaven and wearing new boots, carrying an image of the Holy Virgin upside down in his hand.

Chukhliav's words and the gossip of the village increased her anxiety. When she went to fetch water from the spring the women laughed and turned away from her. When Stepan left for the town all her relatives descended upon her to repeat in reproachful whispers the village gossip.

"Why doesn't he try to stop the Alai from flowing? That's the only thing missing so far."

The needle was still in her hand, the trousers slipped to the floor.

Perhaps that was why the Holy Virgin had been upside down, perhaps that was why her heart was contracted in anxiety, and, waking in the night, Grusha had slipped out of bed, murmuring prayers in the darkness.

"Good God! what's that?" She started and ran out.

Through the dark mist a restrained groaning reached her ears. Grusha tried to locate the sound. "My God! is it Steshka?"

She ran behind the shed. There the groaning could be heard more distinctly. It came from the bath-house on the bank of the Alai. Grusha unfastened the gate and ran down the path to the river.

2

The Alai gurgled quietly between its winding banks; the bath-huts were scattered along the nearer bank, shaded by the rustling alder trees. In the morning twilight fishes played in the deep pools formed by the river, and wild geese cackled among the reeds.

"Children, water." Grusha distinguished words among the

groans. "My God!" she whispered, clambering over the fence that surrounded the bath-house.

On all fours, Shlenka crept out of the bushes; he rose to his feet and walked with heavy tread into the bath-house.

In the bath-house, scarcely visible through the thick choking fumes of spirits, Grandmother Dunya sat huddled in a chair by the still. She was a hundred and one years old, and her black teeth were almost as large as a horse's. She was adding logs to the small furnace, groaning helplessly: "Children, water."

"What's the matter?" Shlenka growled. "What do you want?"

"Oh, Vassya. I'm thirsty, my son."

"Here's malt liquor. You must get used to it."

Shlenka slammed the door behind him and stamped off, following the course of the river until he disappeared among some bushes.

Grusha ran into the bath-house and stopped at the door, coughing from the acrid smoke.

"Who's that? You, Lukeria? Come here, little daughter!"

"No, it's Grusha—Ogneva."

The old woman trembled and waved her hands.

"Run away, run away, dearie. He'll kill you if he sees you. He's hiding somewhere. He'll come in any minute!"

"Do you want some water?"

"They won't give me a drop of water. They'll bury me alive. Yes, give me some water, my dove."

While Grusha was away fetching water from the river, the old woman continued to groan and call for water. When Grusha returned, she drank the water avidly, as if she could never take her fill.

"Granny," Grusha said, "come away. Come away from him. After all, he's not a tsar over you."

The old woman stood up, supporting herself on the table. Her eyes were misty as if they were covered with ashes.

"I'm blind," she said. "I got blind from this poisonous smoke."

Grusha led her out of the hut.

"Take me to the church. Take me to God's house and leave me there," Dunya begged. "Let the people see. Let them wonder. . . ."

Grusha left the old woman by the church railing, and hurried home, looking fearfully to right and left. Her heart

beat wildly like a wounded bird, her face was drawn and her walk uncertain.

"Well I never, father comes home, and there's no mother, no daughter."

Stepan's fresh, laughing voice, the sound of water splashing gaily in the bowl, stilled Grusha's fears.

"So you're back at last."

"I flew back—on a *troika*. How are you all here?" Ognev asked, wiping his face with a towel. "I got a telegram from Zharkov. Is he still here?"

"He went to Alai yesterday."

"Ah! So there's been some trouble here?"

"Terrible," Grusha answered, busy with the samovar. "They were ready to tear each other's hair out."

"So that's why he got the wind up! That's why he wrote 'Come back at once.' And here I am."

Combing his fingers through his beard, Ognev sat down on the bench.

"I had such a terrible dream. You came home clean-shaven."

"Well, it doesn't take them long to shave you over there. You don't have a chance to look round, and they've finished with you. Who's on the Soviet now?"

"Who? Shlenka. I've just been down to the river. He forces his own mother to distil spirits."

"Well, you must expect a goat to stink and a bug to bite. Well, and who else?"

"You. Zaovrazhenoye voted for you. The people from here were all against you. Then Kirka Zhdarkin and somebody else. I can't remember who it was now."

"Right! And I've brought horses."

"What? Horses?" Her eyes shone.

"Come and have a look."

Three horses were tethered to a pole behind the shed; a high brown mare with scarred legs, a weak-kneed colt with flat hindquarters, and a grey colt.

"Here they are." Ognev slapped the grey colt's flank. "Don't you like them? That's only because they've been looked after by townsfolk. We'll put them straight. We'll wash them down and rub them up, and you'll see what fine horses they'll be. We'll have paid for them in two years. Why, we can start life all over again."

Grusha looked at the horses and then at her husband.

Chukhliav's words came back to her: 'he's in their good books, why doesn't he join up with me?' "

"Here I am." Steshka dashed into the yard.

"No," Ognev laughed. "It can't be. How do you know it's you, eh?"

As he spoke Stepan noticed a change in Steshka. She had grown fuller, or at least broader. Her lips had lost their precision and firmness; and her face, that had been too thin, was bright and thoughtful. His eyes rested on her for a few moments, and he thought: "I've got a pretty daughter, I have."

Under his gaze, Steshka flushed a deep red.

"Guess what I've got," she cried, holding her hands behind her back.

"You've got a what do you call it."

"No." Steshka shook her head. "Seriously."

"Well, what have you got, my dove? Tell me," Grusha said. "You've always got something. . . ."

Steshka moved her hands and they saw the corner of a grey envelope.

"From Sergei? Give it to me." He sat down on a stool by the horses and opened the letter. "The rascal. He hasn't been home for ten years, and he sends us three letters a year."

" 'Greetings, dear father'—listen to him, calls me father—'Greetings, dear mother'—do you hear that, mother, he hasn't forgotten you; but nothing about Steshka." Ognev turned to his daughter: "He's forgotten you. All right, I shan't tease you, you're here as well: ' Hallo, my dear little sister!' Little!" Stepan laughed and shook his head. "He thinks we haven't grown any older since he went away."

"Go on, go on reading. What a chatterbox you've come back from the town." Grusha shook him by the shoulder. "Go on reading."

Sergei wrote of his life in Moscow, and that he missed his family very much indeed, that he was longing to see Shirokoye and the Volga again, and that he would without fail get two months' leave of absence to visit his family and to take a rest. At the end of the letter he said that his father had acted quite rightly in organising the fellowship. Co-operation was the only way by which the peasants could improve their hard life. The whole letter breathed affection, cheerfulness and encouragement. It moved Ognev deeply;

but he hid his feeling from the others, murmuring as he went indoors:

"Better if he'd sent some money."

"Don't say that," Grusha said reproachfully, hiding the letter behind the old, cracked mirror. "I'm sure he hasn't even got enough for himself."

"Well, but I brought him up and fed him," Ognev laughed.

His laughter amused Steshka, and Grusha retorted:

"What if you did feed him? What do you think you're his father for?"

"Oh, well, if that's the case, what can I do?" Ognev laughed again. "Come on, let's have something to eat. I must go off to the Congress."

3

The struggle between the different groups in Shirokoye spread to the surrounding villages. It broke out first in Nikolskoye. At the preliminary election meeting, the Communists and their adherents had scored a great success, but at the actual election meeting the supporters of Kerzhakov, an old Social Revolutionary who had served a heavy sentence in Siberia, following Plakushchev's example, had rallied all their forces and the Communist list was defeated. The elections were even more stormy at Bandurenka, Ermolovka and Alai. At Alai the wealthier peasants and former landowners were elected to the District Soviet as well as to the village Soviet. In Chelkashev the election lasted several days. The inhabitants there were divided into two practically equal groups which, as though engaged in a tug-of-war, voted consistently for their own representatives. It took Zharkov a whole day to settle the conflict by arranging that representatives of both groups should be elected to the Soviet.

The delegates prepared themselves for the District Soviet Congress as if for haymaking.

The Congress began. The People's House, formerly the shop of the cloth merchant Serebriakov, a gloomy place with unpolished wooden walls, was filled with delegates, visitors, shopkeepers from Alai, and the drivers who had brought the delegates from the surrounding villages. The first session was devoted wholly to preparations, tea-drinking and decor-

ating the walls with banners. At twelve o'clock, giving way to the pressure of the delegates, the Congress presidium was elected. This item took the rest of the day. Each village and group was anxious to have its own representative on the presidium, while the Communists adhered firmly to their own list.

"Our candidate,"—Plakushchev spoke on behalf of Kerzhakov, cutting the air with his hand at every word—"our candidate represents the poorest class. He suffered for the people in prison. . . ."

"Jail-bird," somebody called out.

"He got mixed up with the officers in Siberia."

"Perhaps he did and perhaps he didn't," Plakushchev replied hurriedly. "You've got to prove it first, but it isn't the time for that now, and so we needn't talk about it."

From his table on the platform, Zharkov saw that, gradually, eighteen delegates had grouped themselves around Kerzhakov and Plakushchev; bearded men with broad, flat chests. The visitors were pushing forward from the outer corridor into the hall.

"Start the voting from the bottom," some delegates shouted.

"We suggest from the middle," others cried.

"Don't talk nonsense," a man shouted from the group of eighteen. "You don't start dinner with pudding and then go back to the soup. You must have a proper order."

At last, after much furious shouting and several interruptions, Zharkov, Kuzmarkin, the chairman of the District Executive Committee, and Zahkar Kataev were elected to the presidium.

The delegates sighed in relief, and welcomed the presidium with a unanimous cheer. The *balalaika* orchestra played the "International" as though it were a mournful religious chant, and the delegates and visitors sang, hoarsely and out of tune, quavering trebles and full-throated bass. It seemed that the noise was too great for the hall; it flooded the room and burst through the door and windows and was carried over the streets to the market-square, disturbing the peaceful drowsiness of Alai.

The Congress opened with a report from Zharkov on the internal and international situation of the Soviet Republic. He embellished his report with examples, comparisons, reminiscences of the old illegal days, of the front, with

anecdotes which he had heard and events he had observed in the Alai district. He went on to speak of the roads mapped out by the Soviet power for developing and improving village economy. He spoke of Socialism as no peasant there had ever heard it spoken of before, and as he could not imagine it to be. Now, listening to Zharkov, the delegates and peasants also began to believe in the future he was describing to them; they grew excited and smacked their lips—but when Zharkov pointed out that the only way out of their poverty and wretchedness was collective peasant economy, a smile ran over the faces of the delegates, which seemed to say: "Oh yes, we've heard all these fine tales before."

Until then Zharkov had resembled somewhat a well-trained thoroughbred matched against a lumbering nag. Seeing that smile, he lost the thread of his remarks, as a man might lose his balance when suddenly confronted with an unexpected abyss. He realised that the delegates were slipping away from him, and he wished at any cost to bring them back. By a scarcely perceptible transition, he launched an attack on the Commune "Progress," which was cultivating the land on the estate of the ex-Count Uvarov. Smiling maliciously, deriding the communards, he gave the Congress the impressions he had received when he visited the Commune. He had been met on his arrival by a pack of dogs. Were dogs so essential to the life of the Commune? The communal property was scattered all over the yards, as if there had been a great fire in the place. The people lived in dirty, smoke-grimed huts, with broken floor-boards, infested by rats. There was dirt and bad smells everywhere. There were enough people for the work to be done, but the fields were in a worse state than those of the neighbouring peasants.

"Of course the peasants run away from such a Commune! The Soviet power has never advised the establishment of such Communes. It isn't a Commune, it's a poor substitute. Dried pumpkins instead of sugar."

The delegates had listened attentively, occasionally interrupting his speech with bursts of laughter and applause. Zharkov saw that the Congress was entirely in his hands again.

After the mid-day interval—Zharkov scarcely had time to eat his dinner—the People's House was overcrowded with the delegates, with peasants from Alai and Shirokoye. Unable to find room in the hall itself, they filled the corridors

and the yard, pressing their faces to the windows, buzzing like wasps in a hollow tree. The question which exercised their minds above all others was that of Zharkov's identity. What was he in the old days? What rank or office did he occupy then?

They argued, quarrelled and swore at each other, arriving finally at the conclusion that in the old days Zharkov must have been a provincial governor.

Having assigned that rank to him, the older men felt flattered at having such an important man over them, and Chizhik, the bee-keeper, a short, pale man with a wen on his nose, twittered like a sparrow:

"We should have met him with bread and salt; such a great personage, and we all attack him like a herd of mad bulls."

Some Red soldiers broke into loud laughter at Chizhik's words. "Do you think they're going to come here with their epaulettes on? No, there's no more epaulettes now."

"I wasn't talking of epaulettes. I only suggested it so that we shouldn't offend him."

Migunchik was one of the visitors in the corridor. He ran from corner to corner, his women's galoshes (by which he was always known) slip-slapping over the boards. He blinked and puffed like a wounded rabbit.

"We'll see, we'll hear what this governor of yours will try and put across us. They're all experts at that. I heard this Zharkov at the district town. He was gabbling something in the market-square. Then he got into a motor-car and went to the restaurant—with some girls, you bet."

The merchant was interrupted by Gorka, a member of the Young Communist League. "You can't say that. He's a responsible Party worker, and you say things like that about him, you speculator!"

"Was I talking to you? Was I talking to you?" Migunchik stammered, and betook himself and his galoshes to another corner.

In one corner, silent and, as it were, swamped by the crowd, Skulov sat at Zakhar Kataev's side. Suddenly he jumped up and leaned over Zakhar.

"Look here, Zakhar Vavilich. Look here, did Zharkov bring the manifesto?"

The idea of a manifesto had only just occurred to Skulov, but immediately he believed in it.

"What about? What manifesto?" Zakhar asked quietly.

"Well," Skulov stammered, "about a horse, a horse for every one of us. . . . Well, don't you believe it? It's true! They say we must all have a horse and some seed, and something else as well. Then I won't have to sell the cow."

"It's just gossip," Zakhar said, and walked away to the presidium table.

Skulov was disappointed. He forgot all about the manifesto. Anxiety cut through his heart like a sword. He stared at the platform and eagerly followed the movements of Zharkov, who had just appeared from behind the curtains. He was met with a storm of cheers. The delegates took their seats, and although Zharkov was as accustomed to applause as a telegraph pole is to telegraph wires, the peasants' welcome excited him. For a while he looked down triumphantly at the delegates, put his glasses straight and, when the noise had died down, began to speak.

"Comrades, we shall now take the second item on the agenda, the report of the District Executive Committee."

For a moment or two there was complete silence, then a muttering was heard, muffled as if it came from under the floor. Soon the noise grew louder:

"Zharkov."

"We want Zharkov!"

"Comrades!" The secretary of the District Committee jumped up. "Comrade Zharkov can't speak any more. He's tired—he's only a man, and there's a great deal to do. Do you understand?"

"Zharkov!"

"Zharkov!"

"Ask him to speak!"

"We want Zharkov!"

"We'll get through the business all right!"

"The fields won't run away!"

The voices merged into a common roar, which thundered back from the walls of the People's House. In the midst of the uproar young Gorka, walking almost on the heads of the delegates, made his way to the window, intent upon propping up a banner which had fallen sideways.

"Leave it alone!"

"What are you up to there?"

"The speaker can't see properly," Gorka screamed back.

"The banner's hiding the window. I must put it straight, citizens."

"Leave it alone."

"It'll do as it is."

"It doesn't matter, we say!"

"Get down!—you're not made of glass."

"Hi, get off me! You're all over the place!"

"What fine citizens you are!" Gorka found his way back to his seat, kicking the delegates as he stepped from bench to bench.

Zharkov spoke again.

4

So two days went by, and it seemed that the anger and hostility which had been so much in evidence during the election of the presidium had been pacified. The faces of the delegates and visitors wore contented smiles. But Zharkov felt that all the Communists present, and particularly Ponomarev, a broad-shouldered, red-faced man with a hoarse, rasping voice, were unfriendly towards him; they scowled when they spoke to him, and avoided him, as if they were engaged in some conspiracy. It worried him somewhat, but he tried to shake off his anxiety.

"It will blow over. It's always the same. The chief thing is that the masses are turning; they're getting nearer to us," he consoled himself.

The delegates settled down peacefully to listen to the District Committee's report. They gave Kuzmarkin as much time as he should think necessary.

"But I hope you'll have pity on us," said Shilov, a delegate from Nikolskoye. "It's harvest-time, don't forget. If it was winter you could have a whole month, you could just go on and on."

On the platform—constructed of old counters—appeared Kuzmarkin, chairman of the District Executive Committee. He was very excited, and frequently drank some water from the glass on the table. From his dispatch-case he drew a sheaf of papers and began, in a stammering voice, to give his report —evidently finding great difficulty in deciphering the writing. Reading from his notes, he informed the Congress of the number of departments and sub-departments in his district (he invariably said: "in my district I have"), of the names of

the persons in charge of the departments and sub-departments, the number of meetings that had been held, the number and nature of the questions discussed and decisions taken. He gave a detailed list of the number of horses, cows, sheep, pigs and other cattle which he had in his department in the past and present, and how many he hoped to have in the future. Figures were also given of the amount of hay consumed by his Executive Committee's horse and the amount of money spent by his administration for office equipment.

At first Zharkov listened attentively to Kuzmarkin's report. The repetition of "I have" and "in my district" annoyed him, but he subdued his irritation with the thought that Kuzmarkin was still inexperienced and was, besides, an ailing man.

But the longer the report went on, the greater grew his irritation. His mind wandered and he yawned at shorter and shorter intervals.

"I must be patient," Zharkov thought. "He's bound to come to an end soon."

Kuzmarkin went on reading.

Forty minutes had passed, or perhaps more. Perhaps Kuzmarkin had been reading for two or three years? Zharkov's head grew dizzy with the multitudinous figures, his back and eyes ached. Involuntarily he ceased to follow the report and observed the delegates. The back rows and the corridors, which had been crowded before, were now empty. He realised from the faces of the delegates that their thoughts were at home or in the fields, ploughing, mixing food for the horses, knocking up something or other in their huts.

"It's sheer mockery," Zharkov thought. "A man would be glad to hang himself if he had to live long with such a chairman." Then he forgot all about Kuzmarkin.

The banner at the window fell again, but nobody thought of putting it straight.

The streets were very quiet. The warm, golden sun streamed in through the windows, flies buzzed in the hall and a delegate began to crack sunflower seeds. Staring out of the window, Zharkov's thoughts wandered first to Brusski, and then to the District Party Committee. What had happened there? The previous day he had received a coded telegram from the Committee informing him that the Red

Commandant Saposhkov had gone over to the bandits. Zharkov had known Saposhkov at the front, and this increased his regret at the other's desertion.

"They'll shoot him if they catch him," he thought.

Kuzmarkin went on reading, reading, reading.

The flies buzzed, the figures whirled in his head and the streets seemed to quiver in the heat mist. How delightful it would be to climb up into a hayloft and sleep.

At last a delegate whose patience was exhausted groaned loudly.

"O-o-oh! It's worse than heartburn."

The delegates moved their bodies in relief, laughed and shouted:

"Let's take questions!"

"We've got a lot of work!"

"It isn't winter," Shilov cried. "We might be able to stand it if it was winter."

"But. . . I've only just begun," Kuzmarkin stammered, waving the sheaf of papers in the air.

5

Stepan Ognev arrived at the Congress as the peasants, expecting the discussion to begin, again filled the hall. Zharkov was speaking on the District report. From the first words he spoke it was clear that he was preparing to attack Kuzmarkin, both with regard to the manner of his report and the work of the District Executive Committee.

"If I, for example," he said, growing pale, but immediately regaining control of himself. "If, from this tribune, I were to spend an hour and a half counting the number of arms, legs, heads and eyes present in this hall——"

The delegates and visitors laughed softly.

"We invited Kuzmarkin," Zharkov's voice rose and he was carried away like a piece of wood by a swiftly flowing stream. "We invited him here in order to learn how the Soviet power regards our needs. What measures it is taking to meet those needs. And he has told us how many puds of hay the D.E.C.'s horse can eat in a year. And look what has happened in one village Soviet, under the very nose of the D.E.C. This village Soviet, of which the Communist Ponomarev is chairman, has introduced taxation of its own accord, and is taxing each villager one pound of grain in

order to buy a stamp. You might think this is a detail, but in Alai there are seven thousand inhabitants, and seven thousand pounds means one hundred and seventy-five puds of grain. One hundred and seventy-five puds of grain for a stamp."

At first the Congress listened in silence. But at the figure "175," delegates and visitors, Zharkov and the presidium, and even Ognev, broke into such hearty laughter that the windows rattled and tears started to Kataev's eyes. Wiping them away with his sleeve, Zakhar shouted:

"What brains! Oh, Lord, what wise heads! Ha, ha, ha!"

Zharkov continued to speak at some length of the work which the District Committee should have carried out and of the unsatisfactory nature of the work it had done. His speech was frequently interrupted by applause, particularly from the group of eighteen delegates gathered around Plakushchev. The cheers were unwelcome to Zharkov, and once he spoke angrily to the eighteen. But as a runner in a race pays no attention to a cloudy sky, all his efforts concentrated on reaching the goal, so Zharkov tried to ignore the group of eighteen, concentrating all his efforts on the job of annihilating Kuzmarkin.

Having finished, he withdrew behind the curtains and a nervous trembling seized all his body. He wiped the sweat from his face, and listened to the loud applause and the clamour for his reappearance. But he did not move.

For some time confusion reigned in the hall. Then Kirill Mitrofanovich Chalkin, one of the eighteen, asked permission to speak. Fingering the lapels of his jacket he began slowly and irresolutely:

"Well, what about it, peasants?" He looked at his group and then over the heads of the delegates to the visitors at the back of the hall. "I was threshing last summer. The Soviet power is all for machines, and we're also for the machines."

"Fat lot of difference that makes," a delegate interrupted. "Why do you think you're called weathercocks?"

"I'm not taking any notice of empty words," Chalkin replied. "Well, so I took a machine from Kuzmarkin, and I did four cartloads with it, and I got twenty-four puds out of it. And I saw there was still some grain left in the ears, so I did it all over again in the old way with horses, and I got another sixteen puds out of it. Are those machines in order? Of course they're not! The District Committee doesn't look

after them properly. They let the machines fall to bits, and the motors as well. I think . . . It's my opinion we might as well send them back."

He sat down, and was immediately followed by another speaker, Kondakov, a pot-bellied man with a pointed beard, who spoke without faltering or hesitation.

"The first thing to do is to return the motors and threshing-machines to their former owners. That will be a very useful thing for the State and for the proletariat. Comrade Zharkov was quite right when he said you can't put a fool on a good horse, and in general it is really shameful that we should act in such a manner with our valuable possessions. . . ."

"I didn't say that," Zharkov wanted to shout, but at that moment the Soviet chairman Ponomarev came from behind the curtains. Resting his elbows on the speakers' tribune he shook his huge, gnarled fists.

"Comrades," he cried hoarsely, "yesterday Comrade Zharkov spoke about his visit to the Commune 'Progress.' He said he was met by a pack of dogs who attacked him, and that you could smell the Commune for seven *versts* round." Ponomarev paused a moment. "Comrades, it's no secret to anybody here that dogs don't bark at strangers. They don't yap at their own folk."

"That's disgusting," Zharkov protested. "I've never heard of anything like it."

"To the nose of a gentleman," Ponomarev continued, "everything seems to stink. Of course, we don't use perfumes. That's just our way. It's all very well to live in the town, and write proclamations and all sorts of articles——'

"Look here," Shilov cried, "what are you jawing about?"

"I'm talking about dogs barking at strangers. Do you understand? And they come here and drive us all mad."

"And what about the stamp?"

"Isn't a hundred and seventy-five enough? Do you want three hundred?"

Confusion and uproar. Ponomarev continued to speak, waving his arms, and the whites of his eyes gleamed strangely in his red face. Now and again his hoarse voice pierced the din.

"It's easy enough to find faults. We don't want strangers."

"I want to speak," Plakushchev called out. Without waiting for Ponomarev to finish, he elbowed his way through the delegates to the tribune, and the noise ceased abruptly.

"Here's Ponomarev," Plakushchev began. "We all know him, and no doubt he's a good Communist. Of course, you can't read another man's heart, so they say. But there's one thing, citizens, the Communists there had a real gold mine to work on. You saw what heaps of manure were left in the fields by the nobles. Millions of puds! And now with the Communists there the land's all unfertile. Once I was passing by, and the dogs barked at me. Am I a stranger? I said to the chairman: 'Why don't you use the manure for this land?' 'We've got enough and to spare,' he answers, 'only we can't do it.' 'How's that?' I says to them. 'It's like this,' he says. 'You can't get everybody together; one man can't and another man won't. And just you look at our village authority.' Well, I looks, and there he was, snoring dead drunk under a tree. Wasn't it you, Ponomarev?" Ilya Maximovich turned suddenly to the chairman of the Alai Soviet.

"I had a bad headache," Ponomarev answered, almost concealed by the curtains.

"Did you? Perhaps we both had headaches. But I saw that you'd been sick right enough. . . . Anyway, I'm sure the dogs don't bark at you. Oh no."

The delegates laughed.

"He's not a stranger."

"He's not a stranger. He likes the stink, and you don't notice a bad smell when you like it."

"When it comes from yourself, you can't smell it."

Zharkov had laughed at Plakushchev's last words, and nodded his head in approval. Plakushchev, as if Ponomarev had been a note which he had read, crumpled in his hands, and thrown away, continued to speak in quiet and impressive tones. He dealt with the policy of the Soviets, referred to the decisions of the Soviet and Party Conferences, quoted several extracts from the speeches of the People's Commissars, and finally drew the conclusion that the motors and threshing-machines should be returned to their former owners.

Scarcely had he finished when Barma, the chairman of the District Mutual Aid Association, sprang on to the platform.

"I have something to say to the Congress. Can I speak, chairman?"

"You may speak."

"The Congress," Barma began, "is deciding the fate——"

"Hold on tight, Barma," Kondakov called out, and his pointed beard wagged vigorously.

Barma's eyes bulged like those of a frightened sheep; he stared at Kondakov and the delegates, and passed his hand over his face.

"Well, go on, go on," Kondakov cried. "I only said it to remind you."

"There you are." Barma moved his hands helplessly. "I told you not to interrupt me. I've forgotten what I wanted to say," he added quietly, and walked away. He was followed by loud laughter.

At that laughter, at the noisy applause which had greeted Plakushchev's remarks and Kondakov's interruptions, Zharkov suddenly realised that the victory was inclining towards the group of eighteen. Rapidly and with intense concentration he weighed the position, and for the first time felt that he had allowed himself to be carried away too far in attacking Kuzmarkin's report; he admitted to himself that his speech had played into the hands of the eighteen.

"I must speak at once," he thought. "But how can I defend the D.E.C.? It's quite true that the machines are in a terrible condition, and the motors are all in bits in the Committee's sheds."

He realised that they would be defeated. With every new speech the Congress moved nearer and nearer to the eighteen, in whose speeches he discerned with growing clarity the demand for the return of private property and the condemnation of Soviet policy. When Plotnikov, the responsible secretary of the District Party Committee, took his place at the tribune, and was hissed off the platform by the eighteen after his first remark that it was unwise to enrich the more powerful men in the villages by returning their former property to them, Zharkov felt that it was as impossible to change the mood of the Congress as to deflect the trajectory of a bullet. Sweat broke out on his forehead, the bell trembled under his hand, and the muscles in his left cheek twitched; it was a nervous tic which he had contracted at the front.

"I call upon Zakhar Kataev to speak," he said.

Nobody wanted to listen to Kataev.

Zharkov patted Zakhar's shoulder and looked across at Ognev. Ognev bent over Shilov, who was sitting in front of him and pushed him from his seat, indicating to Zharkov

that he should allow Shilov to speak, although it was not his turn on the list.

"I've been wanting to speak for a long time," Shilov remarked, as he stepped on to the platform.

"Comrade Shilov will now speak," Zharkov said, and carefully wrote Shilov's name before Kerzhakov's in the list of speakers.

Shilov came to the front of the platform, and observed that the eighteen were preparing to drive him off the platform by making a disturbance.

"Don't trouble," he said quickly. "You won't frighten me. You can shout as much as you like. I'll stand here and wait till you've had enough of it. We'll see who gets tired first. You can shout till morning, and I'll stand here till the morning. Or rather, I'll sit down." He drew a stool from under the table and seated himself. The eighteen were silent.

Shilov stood up again and, looking at them, began to speak in a low voice.

"What are you up to? At every Congress you turn up and ask to have something given back to you. If you carry on much longer in this way you'll take the last shirt from the Soviet power, and say: there's no point in wearing a shirt; it only does you harm."

Zakhar Kataev laughed loudly, and a few delegates followed his example. The laughter and the biting, approving words of other delegates disturbed the eighteen.

"It's easy enough for you to speak," Chalkin cried. "Nobody's taken a single thread from you, but from us they take the labour of years. . . ."

"You only had to give twelve puds extra last year," Kondakov shouted in excitement, jumping up from his seat. "But we had to give twenty."

Plakushchev pulled Kondakov by the sleeve, but it was too late. The words had already been spoken. Plakushchev tapped his forehead with a significant and reproachful finger.

"So that's it," Shilov thought joyfully. "Don't interrupt. I'm speaking. So; they're unfair to you. You've been treated unfairly for years and years. They took the threshing-machines away from you, and the land; and from us,"—he pointed to himself and to the delegates from other villages—"from the provinces, as you might say, they took less than they did from you. Citizens,"—Shilov turned to the main

body of delegates—"don't believe me, believe them. Chalkin was the first to speak. He said that he threshed four cartloads with the machine, and he got twenty-four puds; and then he got sixteen more with the horses. That means forty puds from one *dessiatin*. But the tax was reckoned on twenty puds, not on forty. That's unfair, isn't it? He's like the silly woman who put five pies in the oven, and when she takes out six, moans and cries: 'Oh, how terrible!' "

His last words were drowned in laughter.

"You can die from such unfairness," Shilov cried. "And besides, he says he hasn't got any corn, but he took a machine to thresh it with. That's also unfair, isn't it? And look at us. We wouldn't be insulted by such unfairness. We wouldn't complain about threshing the corn with machines; we don't get the opportunity. We threshed our corn with sticks, and we didn't have enough to give our twelve puds even."

To everybody's surprise—and none were more astonished than Ognev and Shilov—the delegates began a vigorous attack upon the eighteen. Shilov was encouraged. He no longer felt himself forced to bear a heavy burden alone. He leaned forward, pounding one fist in the palm of the other hand, and threw hot, biting words at the eighteen, tearing from them every shred of hypocrisy and pretence.

The excitement grew greater. The delegates left their places, hurling insults and curses upon the heads of the eighteen. Zharkov banged his bell on the table, but realised the uselessness of any such action. He felt as if, with his bell, he was trying to call to order a river which had burst its dam and threatened at any moment to sweep its embankments away.

"Stop!" Ognev's voice rose suddenly above the uproar. "Stop! I want to speak." He walked slowly to the platform.

Complete silence followed his words.

"First about the machines," Stepan began quietly. "Well, why not give them back? And then the houses; we must give the People's House back to Serebriakov." He opened his arms wide, as if to embrace the whole hall. "But we must redecorate it first, because the whitewash is crumbling away. Well, why not?"

Everybody present, including the eighteen, listened in bewilderment. What was Ognev up to? Was he in favour of returning the property, or was he against it?

"And then the land. Why not the land as well? And then they'll say: 'Look here, peasants, the wounds on your backs have healed, and we want some backs to sit on. Come on, let's open the old wounds. We harnessed you for so many years, it was a shame to throw us off!' . . . But there are no such decrees,"— Ognev's voice grew louder and deeper— "There are no such decrees, that we should give the old slave-drivers back their property, and bow to them and say: 'Forgive us, please, for the wrong we did you. It will not happen again, your highnesses.' There are no such decrees, and we won't have any like them. We've got hands, and we haven't forgotten how to hold a rifle."

The delegates grew noisy again, but Zharkov's forehead was smooth, and he did not touch the bell.

Ognev continued:

"When the horse has dragged the cart to the top of the hill, you don't have to help him along. You must help him while he's going uphill. We dragged the cart up the hill— we peasants, with blisters and corns on our hands. And you? You hung on behind. And now you want to sit in the cart. No, we didn't spill our blood for that, to get you on our backs again. We were Bolsheviks,"—he flung out both arms—"and we will remain Bolsheviks."

6

Standing among the bushes on the steep hill, Yashka Chukhliav looked down frowningly at the reed-covered surface of the Goose Lake. It was scarcely a lake, but rather a large bay formed by the river, but because of its stillness and steep banks, and the droves of wild geese which inhabited it, it had been named the Goose Lake. In the transparent mist which rose from the water, faintly pink like an apple tree in blossom, the lake rippled and gleamed like the back of a sable horse.

Cutting through the thick undergrowth, Yashka approached the bank, squatted down and, resting his face in his hands, stared at the water for a long time. Lumps of wood and clay boulders, covered with moss and grass, stuck out from the water. Now and again small fishes darted between the boulders, moving with astonishing smoothness and swiftness, and water-beetles whirred over the surface of the bay.

"The lake can't be empty," Yashka whispered. "If the little ones are here, there must be big ones as well."

Yashka was greatly in need of money. He knew that it would be extremely difficult to persuade Yegor Stepanovich to send the marriage-makers to Steshka Ogneva (although Chukhliav scarcely ever interfered in household affairs now, and agreed to everything which Yashka did). It would be easier to manage the business if he had a hundred roubles or so of his own. So he had decided to avoid, by one way or another, the sharp eye of Kuzmich, the river watchman, to catch fish in the Goose Lake, and to sell his catch in Ilim. He had discussed the plan with Vasska Darin and Ivan Merkushin. They knew what the money was needed for, and gladly agreed to help their friend.

On the alert for the slightest sound, Yashka bent lower over the water. The lake stretched broadly under the sun, moving rhythmically like the breast of a heavy sleeper, lapping its banks caressingly.

After a while Yashka began to lose hope. He tried to evolve other plans for obtaining the money. Should he go to Ilim and find a job as a carpenter? He would have to work at least two years in the factory before he could save enough money. And the business would not wait. He regretted that he had returned to Plakushchev the bundle of clothes stolen by Akhmetka. There had been a sheepskin coat that was worth at least seventy-five roubles, and with the other things he might have made up the necessary two hundred. Well, it wasn't very nice even to think about it, but a man doesn't willingly put his own neck in a noose.

Suddenly he sprang back and then leaned lower over the lake. To his left, from under the low-hanging branches of the aspens a shoal of bream, flat and broad, moved evenly towards the centre of the lake. Then came a second shoal, and a third, and suddenly, at about five yards from Yashka, something broke the smooth surface of the water.

"That must be a sheat-fish!" Yashka almost cried the words aloud. "Look, there's lots of them—more and more!"

Another shoal of bream moved out lazily from under the aspen trees. After swimming for a minute or two, the fish suddenly scattered in all directions, and the lake became rough, as if beaten up by horses' hoofs.

"Oh, a pike, a pike!" Yashka clapped his hands and ran along the river-bank to the village. The sun was setting

behind the Balbashikha hills, like a rosy-cheeked, smiling old man. Soon it would be dark, and Yashka had to procure a net. He hoped to borrow one from Stepan Ognev; and he would also have to let his friends know of the arrangement. But most important of all, the lake had to be cleared of branches and other rubbish, or else the net would be caught in them and lost for ever. And it was by no means a simple matter to clear the lake.

"It's one of two things," Yashka thought as he hurried along. "You'll either have to dive for it, or live the rest of your life with Zinka Plakushchev."

Having climbed the fence around the threshing-ground, he drew near to the barn. Vasska and Ivan came forward to meet him.

"Well, how goes it?" Vasska asked, nodding his head towards the lake.

"Shoals of 'em! Ivan, you get the boat, and you, Vasska, ask your little brother to keep watch at Kuzmich's house, and you stand there on the hill behind the barn. But don't forget the kerosene and some matches, and if anything happens, let us know. Well, come on, my lads."

The blue evening closed over the thatched roofs of Shirokoye. Yashka crossed the hemp-fields, making for Ognev's hut. Not far from the edge of the hemp-field Dunya Pchelkina was digging up potatoes for the evening meal.

"Look at her; she's managing quite well without her husband!" Yashka glanced at her bent back and called out, "God's blessing on you, widow!"

"Have you found the boots, Yasha?"

"No! The devil knows where they've got to. I put them on the steps when I came back, next to Plakushchev's clothes. And as soon as I came out of the house, father said: 'The boots have gone!' " For the tenth time Yashka explained to the widow the disappearance of Pchelkin's calf-leather boots.

Dunya believed that Chukhliav had the boots, and Yashka himself often wondered where they could have disappeared to. He always felt extremely ill at ease when Dunya inquired about them; he could not believe that they had just vanished into the air.

"Well, what can I do about it?" he thought, continuing on his way. "I can't give her my own instead."

He entered Ognev's yard as if he had lived there all his

life, shut the gate carefully, fixed the loop round the nail and, having wiped off the bits of clay which stuck to his feet, went indoors.

In the darkness of the hut he distinguished Grusha's head on the bed.

"Where's everybody?" he asked, looking round.

"Is that you, Yashka?" Grusha sat up. "I just lay down for a bit. I've been working like a slave to-day. The girls have dragged Steshka off to Toronok."

"I don't want her," Yashka answered. "Where's Stepan?"

"He's at Chizhik's. They're drinking tea, with that man—what's his name? Zharkov—he's also there."

Yashka ran out from the hut like a horse that has broken from its halter. So Steshka had gone off to Toronok! And she knew that he was going to catch fish that night. And to-morrow Kuzmich might skin him like a squirrel, and she had gone to Toronok! All she cared about was dancing and gadding about. So that's what she meant when she said she was afraid of Peka Kataev? Hypocrite! All right, we'll see!

He ran down to the Krapivny valley and decided to go on to Toronok and find out what Steshka was doing. He wanted to fling himself among the company of boys and girls, to give vent to all his anger against Steshka by dancing with another girl. Yes, that was what he would do. He would put his arm round her—perhaps it would be that Zinka Plakushcheva—and kiss her passionately in front of everybody, in front of Steshka. Let her watch them, and see if she will swank any more. He would leave her there, and go off to Ilim and work in a factory there, and after two years he would return to Shirokoye, but not as he was then—barefooted and wearing homespun trousers. When he came back he would be no worse off than Kirka Zhdarkin.

Yashka had already crossed the valley when he remembered the fishing expedition, and recollected that Vasska and Ivan were waiting for him.

"Anyway," he thought, turning back and walking towards Chizhik's house, "who would want you now?" At the same time he was deeply pleased by the thought that Steshka was no longer a girl and that she was so near to him.

But this joy was smothered by feelings of envy, anger and bitterness because Steshka could not wait for him, but had gone to Toronok.

"She hasn't got enough patience. . . ."

7

After a stormy discussion, interrupted by angry shouts, the victory at the District Soviet Congress fell to the Communists; towards the close of the Congress the delegates were so embittered against the group of eighteen that, when Kerzhakov's name was put forward for the Executive Committee, the suggestion was greeted with an outburst of hissing. The delegates voted for the list drawn up by the Communist faction: Shilov, Nikolaev, Embutka, Stepan Ognev and Grigory Ermilin, a bitter opponent of Kerzhakov.

The Congress closed amid cheers, with a solemn promise to render full support to the newly elected Committee, the singing of the "International," and an invitation to Zharkov to visit the villages which he had not yet seen.

"You must be fair to everyone alike, you know."

Zharkov promised to come when he had the time; he would take a month's holiday, and spend it in the Alai district, but for the moment it was quite impossible. Urgent business demanded his presence in the district town. Another time—later. He couldn't say anything more definite yet. The delegates were satisfied, and hurried away home.

But when all the delegates except the Communists had left the Congress, and Zharkov had expressed the hope that the newly elected Committee, under Shilov's leadership, would carry on their work satisfactorily, and had promised to send a Control Commission from Ilim as one of the most essential steps towards improving and strengthening the Party in Alai, Zharkov, to his own astonishment, was suddenly overwhelmed by a feeling of intense sadness. He glanced at Ognev, Kataev and Chizhik, who were waiting for him, and longed, if only for one hour, to live without thinking of the "world situation," of the social revolution, of the bandits, of the province, or even of Chizhik alone. . . . Just to live, to throw off the burden of everlasting responsibility, the responsibility for every action, every word, every movement. To live as Chizhik lived. Before his eyes rose the fields of Shirokoye, cut by valleys and ravines, the Volga, Brusski, the birch copse and Steshka's bare, firm legs moving among the trees.

"What's the matter with me?" he thought, looking at Chizhik. "Do I need physical work? Then I'd better go into a factory. Or is it degeneration, the influence of back-

ward village life? Yes, it would be fine to spend a fortnight like that . . . and nobody need know. No, it won't do! I must get back into harness."

"Alexander Yakovlevich," Chizhik said to him, after having whispered something to Zakhar. "Why are you hurrying away? It's late already. Come and spend the night with us in Shirokoye. We'll have some tea at my place, and some honey, and you can have a rest. And in the morning you can go on your way, eh?"

Chizhik's words fell pleasantly on Zharkov's ears. In his pocket lay the third telegram requesting him to return to the District Committee. It was impossible not to obey. But then, as so often happened, Zharkov deceived himself. He assured himself that it was absolutely essential to revisit Shirokoye in order to confirm the conclusions he had drawn as to the position there, to talk to the villagers in their homes. He accepted Chizhik's invitation and the four men set out for Shirokoye.

They sat in Chizhik's hut, drinking tea and talking. Yashka came into the yard; unwilling to call Stepan aside, he went into the shed and sat down on the bench, thinking of Steshka. The conversation from the hut reached his ears.

"Alexander Yakovlevich," Chizhik said, "do try a little common sense."

"What?"

"He means honey. He calls honey common sense." Zharkov smiled.

"Well, why not?" Chizhik began a long story of how, some years before, he had cured a sick landlord with honey.

"Why can't you cure the bump on your nose with it?" Ognev asked, smiling.

The previous summer Chizhik had scratched his nose badly on the hooks of his fishing net, and the wound would not heal, in spite of the application of plasters and pig-weed compresses.

"It's no use," Chizhik decided. "I'm worn out; falling to bits." And he applied beeswax to his nose.

While Zharkov was sitting at table, the bump on Chizhik's nose became so repulsive to him that he felt he was being offered, not honey, but a dish of syphilis germs, and that, if he was to put a spoonful of it to his mouth, it would be immediately covered with little bumps like the one on Chizhik's nose. He looked with disgust at Chizhik's wound

and at the honey, smiled and talked to his companions, and hid his hands under the table.

"Don't be afraid," Chizhik said, observing Zharkov's confusion. "It isn't catching. We've never had any infections here; we're the cleanest people in the street."

Chizhik related the story of the origin of his wound; he spoke in so peculiar and absurd a manner that the other three men were literally doubled up with laughter.

"It wasn't that at all." Zharkov stretched out a hand for the honey.

"That's right."

Yashka became unbearably annoyed and depressed. He felt a wild longing to run across the fields, to bury himself in the depths of the forest and howl at the dark sky like a wolf, so full was his heart of anger and pain.

"Why did you do it?" For the tenth time, in his imagination, he questioned Steshka, and walked resolutely into the hut.

"Ah, Yashka!" Zharkov stretched out a hand to him, putting his spectacles straight with the other. "Where have you been all this time?"

"In London."

"Where?"

"In London."

"He means Nikolskoye. We call it London because we can get anything there, kerosene and salt and all sorts of things," Zakhar explained.

"And now you can buy all those things openly in the market at Alai," Chizhik added. He did not ask Yashka to sit down. "What were you doing in Nikolskoye?"

"I went to sell the horse. It was covered all over with sores."

Zharkov laughed heartily when Zakhar related the story of Chukhliav and his horse the day before Karasyuk's raid on the village. Yashka took the opportunity of calling Ognev out into the yard. A minute or two later Zharkov joined them.

"What are you two whispering about?"

"He wants to catch fish. He's been asking for my net, and I suppose I'll have to give it to him. He's promised to come over to our side." Ognev smiled. "That's how we bribe him."

"Fishing?" Zharkov asked. "Take me with you."

It was only later that Zharkov realised that he had ac-

cepted Chizhik's invitation and offered to accompany Yashka because he wished to see Steshka again. He was scarcely conscious of this feeling, but whenever he saw Steshka his lower lip, which usually drooped loosely, grew firm, his legs stiffened. It was pleasant to see Steshka, to talk to her, to steal a glance at her large, greenish eyes. Frequently he caught himself thinking of his own wife, and realised that he did not want to have her for ever before his eyes, a stooping, hurrying figure. When speaking to the peasants he often remembered her pointed and sensible remarks on the peasant question; in his work among the villagers he had often applied, and with considerable success, the suggestions she had made to him before his departure. But more frequently, and in quite a different fashion, he thought of Steshka. Steshka drew him to her, he wanted to be with her. More than once he thought of her during his work, even during his report to the District Congress. More than once he felt a strong inclination to quote her as an example of health and energy, and to say: "For these people, for our young generation, it is worth working and toiling, to reconstruct and improve this savage, remote, backward village life."

Perhaps it was this which attracted him to Yashka.

Of late Yashka had avoided Zharkov. When he saw him and Steshka laughing merrily together, he became silent and hastily withdrew from their sight. Now that Zharkov had asked to accompany him, Yashka, although fully aware of the real reason behind the offer, deemed it not inadvisable to have somebody in Zharkov's position with him on an expedition which might prove dangerous. He smiled and turned to Ognev.

"Well, speak up," Ognev laughed.

"Well, I . . . you see. . . . How shall I put it? We're going to a forbidden place, we might be caught," Yashka explained, afraid of scaring Zharkov away.

"Now that's really interesting," Zharkov said, paying no attention to the meaning of Yashka's words. "That makes it much more interesting."

"Well, then, let's go."

"I'll come along too," Ognev added.

8

Ilya Maximovich was the last to leave Alai. In spite of their defeat at the Congress, his eyes sparkled. He had not lost hope; on the contrary, he was convinced that at the next election—and in general—the victory would be on his side.

"We made a false step," he said to Kondakov over the samovar. "But we'll be on top next time. Only we must take a lesson from them, and be careful what we say," Plakushchev reproached Kondokov for his remark about the threshing.

On the way home he decided to call upon Yegor Stepanovich. They had not met for three days. He wanted to discuss the events at the Congress; it might be possible to stir Chukhliav and drag him from his hole.

"He's a clever man really, only he will keep out of things. If he came in, there'd be a whole lot following him."

He crossed the bridge. The wind swung open the gate of Nikolai Pyriakin's yard. The brown cow ambled out, followed by the colt, and the two animals trotted off towards the Krapivny valley.

"They'd make fine watchmen," Plakushchev growled, and rapped sharply at the window. "Hi, peasant! Your animals have gone out, they're off towards the allotments."

"Kolya!" Katya cried in the hut. "The horse has gone away."

"All right, bring him back!" Nikolai was indifferent.

"But I'm frightened. He bites!"

"Take a stick with you."

"Hopeless!" Ilya Maximovich muttered, and went to Chukhliav's house.

Yegor Stepanovich was sitting on the red stone in the yard, thinking of all the obstacles which separated him from Brusski.

"What do you worry about other people's cattle for?" he asked, greeting Ilya Maximovich. "Let them go to the allotments. They'll give it to him hot if his beasts spoil the vegetables."

The two men sat a long time in the darkness of the yard, speaking of one thing and another. When the church bell struck the hour of ten, and the huts of Shirokoye seemed to melt into the general greyness, Ilya Maximovich rose.

"Well, that's all right. So you agree?"

"Oh yes, I give my consent. But as for Yashka——" Yegor Stepanovich smacked his lips.

Two people slipped out of Ognev's yard. They carried a rod over their shoulders, and from the rod something dangled and trailed along the ground.

"Fishing nets," Yegor Stepanovich exclaimed. "They're going to steal fish. Communists!"

"Well, that's none of our business," Plakushchev said and, having bidden the other good night, went home.

"It's not our business," Chukhliav repeated. But when Ilya Maximovich disappeared, he ran down to the Krapivny valley, stopping for a few moments to drive Pyriakin's animals on to Fedunov's allotment. Shortly after, he rapped hurriedly on the window of Kuzmich's hut.

9

Yashka, Zharkov and Ognev scrambled down the steep bank. It would have been easier and much more agreeable to approach the lake from the road, but that way gave them no opportunity of hiding from Kuzmich's vigilant eye, nor would it have been possible to see Vasska Darin's signal. Beating back the bushes which scratched their faces and tore their clothes, they descended to the shore of the bay. Awaiting Ivan's arrival in the boat, they fixed their eyes on the small stream which connected the lake and the Volga. Now and again the fish darted from under the bending willow branches, and geese cackled among the reeds, shattering the deep silence. Then all was still again, and the lake once more looked like the bottom of a gigantic beer bottle.

There was no sign of the boat. The men became restless; Yashka spat impatiently into the water. What could have happened? Ivan should have been there long ago, waiting for them. Perhaps Kuzmich had caught him. Kuzmich was a sly, inquisitive fellow. Of course he wouldn't make any trouble while Zharkov was there; he would just smile. But when Zharkov had gone back to town, he would summon Yashka to court, and then there would be endless bother and trouble. Perhaps Kuzmich had caught up with the boat at the entrance to the lake, and might turn up at any moment. Would it be better for Stepan to hide the net? Zharkov wanted to smoke. Several times he had taken out his cigarette-case, and then slipped it back into his pocket, feel-

ing Yashka's restraining hand on his shoulder. Instead he fidgeted with his spectacles and stared at the place from which the boat should appear.

"What a fine, strong family they are!" he thought, glancing at Ognev, and regretting that he had not appreciated Stepan's worth from the first, had made no attempt to become friendly with him.

Silently, as if it were gliding through the air, the boat slipped out from the shadows of the bank and drew near to the three men.

"At last!" Yashka pushed Ognev forward and stepped first into the boat.

In a few moments Yashka and Ivan stood up in the boat, their naked white bodies gleaming in the darkness. Ognev slipped the boathook into the water, drew up tangled weeds and branches and threw them on to the bank. In this way he cleared the water for about six yards, and then said softly:

"There's a good deal of rubbish here, branches and wooden posts."

Plom-m-mp! Yashka and Ivan dived into the lake with a noise resembling that of a shell burying itself in the water.

Zharkov sat in the stern, bewildered by the actions of his companions.

Icy shivers ran down his spine. It seemed to him that the boys had been under water much too long, and the spot where they had dived was perfectly still. Perhaps it was just the darkness, and he could not see properly. He pushed his glasses straight and bent low over the water. The water was quite still and seemed to be terribly cold.

He wanted to cry to Ognev that it was high time to put an end to this stupid affair, but at that moment the water broke into ripples. Then a head appeared, and the surface of the lake was cut by the posts of a large wooden frame. Ognev seized it and deposited it among the reeds; the two boys clambered back into the boat.

Yashka looked across to Shirokoye, while Ivan shivered and shook himself vigorously.

"Curse it, it's like ice down there."

"That's because of the stream," Yashka explained quietly. He looked at Ognev and saw that the boathook had again caught in something. Yashka dived in the lake again. Ivan followed him.

Again Zharkov stared down at the water for what seemed

to him a very long time, but when a long branch appeared on the surface of the water he seized it, just as Ognev had done, and threw it on to the bank. He saw Yashka put his head under water, like a duck, and reappear a moment later with another wooden frame.

"I knew there were two of them," he said softly, putting the frame in the boat.

So they went on, Ognev clearing away the weeds and rubbish with his boathook, while Yashka and Ivan tackled the heavier obstacles. As they progressed, the work became more and more difficult and the two divers stayed in the water all the time. Zharkov grew wholly absorbed in the adventure, and did not notice that the water had got into his boots, and that his trousers were soaking wet at the knees.

THE SIXTH LINK

I

WINTER was approaching, ushered in by heavy ground frosts, the flight of the geese, the howling of the wind, and by the appearance of a crust of ice on the rivers. Soon it would be the marriage season. The streets of Shirokoye would be filled with singing, and more than one young lad would become a husband, and more than one young girl would forget the evening gatherings. But Yashka's pocket was as empty as before. The fishing expedition at the Goose Lake had ended in complete disaster. When Vasska Darin's torch flared up behind the threshing-ground, the net had been caught in the branches, and in the excitement half of it had been torn away. Do what he would, Stepan could not repair it; the net was quite useless. Of course, it was not Yashka's fault. It was not his fault that at the last moment Zharkov had become afraid that the news of the adventure might spread, and lost his head completely. Why had he come into it at all, then?

After that defeat Yashka worked like an ox; he reaped and mowed and threshed as if preparing his land for an exhibition. Even Yegor Stepanovich was astonished at his son's labours. But whenever Yashka suggested that it was time to send the marriage-makers to Steshka, he was met by silence or by Chukhliav's hasty exit from the room. A few days before Yegor Stepanovich had answered him:

"I've told you already that we want somebody of our own sort here. Ilya Maximovich has got a fine girl—take her. But her—she's as naked as pig-weed in winter. I won't have her here."

The days ran on. Yashka racked his brains devising ways and means of obtaining money. When the first snow fell, and the sledges rumbled over the roads, he wrote a letter to Zharkov. Zharkov answered with an invitation to the town and a promise to find Yashka work to do. The evening before he had told Steshka of his plans.

Walking along the narrow, bumpy path across the fields, Yashka reflected on his position. In his pocket he carried a small purse embroidered by Steshka, and to his back was strapped a linen sack packed tight with meat pies, socks, underlinen and a spare pair of boots.

At the "nine brothers," a group of nine oaks along the road, Yashka stoppcd and looked back at Shirokoye.

"Good-bye for the present, Steshka," he murmured, rearranging the sack on his back. "Perhaps we'll never see each other again," he added mournfully, and went on.

He had to make fifteen *versts* before evening in order to reach the village of Korneshka, where he intended to spend the night. The next morning he would start on a march of forty *versts* and reach Zharkov's quarters at nightfall.

"Mind you stop with him," Yegor Stepanovich had advised. "That way you'll kill two birds with one stone. First of all you won't have to pay for lodging, and secondly, if he's got you there hanging round his neck, he'll have to get you a job to get rid of you."

He had not tried to dissuade Yashka from leaving the village, but he had not given him a horse to take him to the town.

"We did a thousand *versts* to the Caspian," he said, "and it was nothing at all. And this is only sixty. It ought to be nothing to you—as easy as spitting."

"The devil," Yashka growled, slipping into the ruts and holes along the road. "He's made of iron. . . ."

He hurried on, and in spite of the biting frost he soon felt quite warm. He flung open his coat and quickened his pace. Noticing a pcasant driving his cart down the hill in front of him, Yashka decided to overtake him and to ask for a lift. He began to run; the sack bumped up and down on his back, the heel of one boot coming down repeatedly on his right shoulder-blade. For some time Yashka ignored the discomfort, merely shrugging his shoulders. Then the blows became unbearably painful. He stopped, rearranged the position of the sack so that the boots should be uppermost, and as he started off once more the thought of Pchelkin's shiny calf-leather boots flashed through his mind. Later Yashka was astounded at the thought, and frequently recounted the incident to Steshka.

2

Scraping the frozen tears from the knot of her kerchief, Steshka followed the figure of Yashka until it was lost behind the snow-covered hill. Slowly she walked back along the street.

Steshka was sad; her heart seemed to contract from grief, and she kept her large, tear-filled eyes to the ground. What a queer life it is! It's hard to see things clearly. Look at Nastka Gurianova; she was going to marry her sweetheart, Vasska Darin, and all day she was busy sewing new dresses, and putting her fine down pillows in the window, so that everyone could see. She went about all dressed up like a doll. . . . And Nastka's step was light, her voice clear and deep like a woman's. And Vasska Darin had a new cloth suit. . . . He had gone past the window on Sunday, just look at him, the swanker! Strutting about in his new suit and his padded sheepskin coat.

Everyone was busy; the girls and boys seemed intoxicated with youthful joy. But Steshka was not thinking of them, it was not because of them that the tears trickled down and froze on her shawl like beads. A low fence stood across her path, but although it was low, she could not jump across it. She tried hard to cross it, and the redness left her cheeks, her eyes were lost in deep blue shadows, the soft blue veins on her temples swelled and something quivered and moved under her breast. Yes, it was a woman's affair, a cursed affair. . . . And Yashka did not want to jump over the fence —he wanted to go round it, like everybody else, on a *troika* with jingling bells, along the well-worn road.

"Oh my, what a life!"

She quickened her pace, and a feeling of powerless rage surged over her as she passed Chukhliav's house and ran across the lane. Home! Home, as quick as possible, just to fall on her mother's neck, to confess her anxiety and grief, to tell her mother everything, everything. Perhaps it would be easier to bear after she had shared her trouble with mother.

At the corner of the street—Steshka only paused for a moment—she heard the obscene words of a song that had been composed about herself and Yashka. The voice was Peka Kataev's. She reddened, drew herself erect and glanced for a moment at Peka, past the faces of the boys who surrounded

him. Peka lowered his head, and the song ceased; the boys' laughter flooded the street. Steshka kicked the gate open with her foot, threw off her coat and flung herself on to the bunk, where she lay until evening, crying softly and restrainedly.

At evening a group of girls crowded into the hut. They invited Steshka to Nastka Gurianova's "farewell-spinster" party. Nastka herself chattered without pause. Olena drew Steshka aside and whispered to her:

"Peka's dead drunk. He's crying in Fedunov's yard—all because of you. It's really terrible to look at him."

The girls went away. Steshka followed them into the yard, and sat down on the bench, huddled together and longing for Yashka. She stared at the starry sky, counting the days, the weeks, until Yashka's return. At times her eyes gleamed joyfully in the darkness as she thought of the child that would be hers. If she was really pregnant, she would write to Yashka.

"You're a father. You must come back to Shirokoye. . . ."

And of course he would come back; he would not leave her to shame and mockery.

She passed her hand over her body; her stomach did not feel as firm and muscular as usual; it had grown softer, and seemed to sag.

Steshka shuddered. A man ran out of the lane, stumbling from side to side of the street and waving threatening fists. Steshka stood up and recognised Shlenka.

"Ognev!" Shlenka screamed. "Stepka, you Communist, you group man. Do you think we're maggots, eh? Come out here, and we'll see who's the better man. Who's there?" he cried, noticing Steshka. "According to what decree?"

"You lump of muck," Steshka flung at him and went indoors.

Shlenka continued to howl at the gate; then his voice retreated and finally died away, as if it had been swallowed into the earth.

3

Yegor Stepanovich Chukhliav was extremely perturbed. Why had Yashka returned? The boy said he had forgotten his passport. But what need had he of his passport, since he was to stay with the most influential man in the whole pro-

vince? No, there was something else in it. If it was merely the passport, Yashka would have taken it and gone off again; but he had just spent the whole evening wandering over the village, looking for something. He had something in his mind, he must be getting ready for something, either to clip Yegor Stepanovich's wings, or . . .

"And so he will, the dog, without blinking an eyelid!"

Yegor Stepanovich rose unusually early, with a premonition of trouble. Without any cause, he scolded Klunya harshly and wandered aimlessly over the yard and among the sheds. Passing in front of a large cupboard which he used as a secret storing-place, Yegor Stepanovich stopped suddenly.

"The bark! Could he have told them about it?"

For two years he had been stealing bark from the State forest. Returning home from the fields at evening, he would slip into the depths of the forest, strip a score or so of young lime trees, tie up the bark and hide it away in the shed. Now, running indoors for his keys, he returned and unlocked the cupboard. For the first time he noticed the amount of bark which he had collected. There was enough to make bast shoes for the whole village.

"He could tell on me, and then they'll fine me—or even give me prison. They're glad enough to get hold of anything as an excuse nowadays. What shall I do with it?"

He began to shovel away the snow around the shed, intending to hide the bark under the snow; but it was not yet deep enough, and in any case he could not do it during the daytime; people might see, and by night-time it might be too late.

"These damned—— Who's that?"

Hearing footsteps approaching, Yegor Stepanovich left the cupboard. Recognising Ilya Maximovich, he grew somewhat calmer and came out of the shed, closing the door behind him.

"Yegor Stepanovich," the other began. "Do you know if your Yakov has gone to town for a long time?"

"Gone to the town?" Chukhliav was astonished and answered angrily, "He's back again home. What do you want him for?"

Plakushchev sat down on the bench.

"What for? I'm worried . . . a father's heart." He was silent a moment. "Listen, I wouldn't tell anyone except you. Last night, Zinushka"—he wiped away a tear—"I caught her trying to hang herself, the silly girl."

"What do you say?"

"I was coming home from the meeting. I steps into the passage, and I hear someone gasping. I thought it was the calf—our calf's sick. So I struck a match—and she was hanging there."

"No? Did she hurt herself?"

"We managed to bring her round. You know, I've been so busy lately, I didn't notice anything. Only yesterday, when I went to the Soviet, I fancied she was crying. . . ."

"Oh, you poor man."

"You,"—Ilya Maximovich looked away—"you remember our agreement in the summer? Let them get married."

They were silent. Cheerful thoughts ran through Chukhliav's head like lanterns flickering through the darkness.

"Good business. If he can get Kirka into a corner, get him on his own side, then Yashka can do what he likes about the bark."

"Your family's just to my liking," Plakushchev continued, tracing patterns in the snow with the toe of his boot. "And Yashka's a handy fellow."

Again they were silent.

"Yes, I remember." Yegor Stepanovich nodded slowly. "But what can I do? If it depended on me, they'd be married to-morrow, but he's got his own ideas. You know what things are like nowadays. You can't sit down on your own backside without asking permission first."

"Yes, I know. But you might try and persuade him, tempt him. . . ."

"Tempt him?" Chukhliav laughed. "You can't do that with boys these days. When we were young it was different. We never set eyes on a girl, but now they run after them when they're still wearing napkins. Anyhow, you have my consent."

They spoke of the marriage season, and Yegor Stepanovich dropped several hints about Kirka Zhdarkin. . . . He was quite convinced now that the chairman of the village Soviet was an important person in the village, who could do a great deal if he wanted to. . . . Shlenka, of course, what sort of chairman was he? A regular plague! But Kirka had a good head on his shoulders, good enough for the whole of the village. Ilya Maximovich had done well to make Kirka chairman, and to sweep Shlenka out of the Soviet. Kirka was just the right man for the job, all he

wanted was a little pushing. . . . What did Ilya Maximovich think about it?

At that they parted.

Yegor Stepanovich felt relieved and cheerful. He even threw a few kind words to the chickens who had overstepped the bounds of their territory. Entering the hut, his mood changed abruptly. Yashka was sitting at Klunya's side, carefully wiping the dust from Pchelkin's calf-leather boots. Yegor Stepanovich drew in his lips.

"Whose boots are those? Why are you always dragging your rubbish into the house without asking me?"

"Don't you know whose boots they are?"

"I've never set eyes on them before."

"Oh, haven't you? But I found them in your cupboard just the same. I expect they flew there by themselves. Haven't you any shame in you, to steal a pair of boots from a widow?"

"You young swine!" Silently Yegor Stepanovich cursed his son. "Everybody will get to hear about it. . . . Shall I snatch them away?"

"The chairman will be here for them any minute now. I'm just polishing them up."

Chukhliav imagined the table at the Soviet house, Manafa drawing up the report and all the peasants laughing.

"Fancy taking a pair of boots from a defenceless widow, you scoundrel."

Of course Yegor Stepanovich would deny any knowledge of the boots. He had not the faintest idea where they came from. Yashka had put them there on purpose, to get his father into trouble, to take his revenge. He was confident of being able to clear himself before the court, but no court decision could stop the gossip.

"And Zhdarkin's also coming about the bark. They say he's heard something about it. . . ."

No, that was too much; the sweat poured down Yegor Stepanovich's face as at harvest-time; his lips trembled.

Footsteps were heard in the yard. Someone was wiping his feet at the door. Yashka and Klunya were silent. The door opened.

"Hallo," Kirka Zhdarkin said. "Where's the master of the house?"

Yegor Stepanovich jumped up from the bench and ran to Zhdarkin, touching him on the shoulder very lightly, as if he were afraid of cutting his visitor in two.

"You've come just at the right moment. I was thinking of sending for you."

Yashka's eyes opened widely. Nervously, Yegor Stepanovich pulled forward a stool, dusted it with his sleeve, and offered it to Zhdarkin.

"Sit down, Kirill Senafontich," he said, looking straight into Zhdarkin's eyes. "You're the chairman, and a great power in the village," he stammered slightly. "Well, so I wanted to ask you, can a non-Party man marry the daughter of a Communist? How would that be?"

"Of course he can." Kirka smiled. "Nowadays you can marry anyone you like, only not in the direct family, of course."

"Oh, so that's the law to-day, is it?"

"What did you want to know about it for?"

"It's like this, my Yashka here wants to marry Steshka Ogneva, and I thought it was against the law; but if you say it isn't——"

Shuffling his feet, Yegor Stepanovich drew Kirka with him into the other room.

4

On his mother's side, Kirka Zhdarkin came from the Uvarkin family. His mother, Tatiana, a pretty, healthy woman, had been with her family in the service of Uvarov, a landowner. Evil tongues still spread the tale that Tatiana's husband, Senafont, a timid and sickly man, had died very suddenly. Uvarov had offered him a drink one day when they were out hunting, and that was the end of him. Tatiana's children resembled Uvarov closely; they were short and fair. Kirka alone took after his grandfather Artamon. Even when Artamon was near his grave, a single blow from his fist would send a man's soul flying away.

When Kirka came home from the front, he found his allotment a yard high in weeds; the barn and shed were terribly dilapidated, and the wooden planks had been stolen from the roofs. (Later Kirka learned that Chizhik was responsible for this.) But Kirka was not downhearted. He rolled up his sleeves, spat on his hands, and set about work with as much energy as he had displayed in following up the retreating Whites. He cleared the weeds from the allotment, bought two buckets of spirits, gathered together all

his relatives, and in twenty-four hours the shed and barn were repaired. Many peasants were deeply impressed by his behaviour when he returned from the front: he did not boast or idle his time away, but at once set his teeth into the work. It was true that many of the villagers laughed heartily at Kirka because he had spent the whole summer on his swampy bit of land, but when autumn came, and Kirka's wheat turned out to be the finest in the whole village, the peasants were compelled to take him seriously. They began to ask his advice, and when Ilya Maximovich suggested, very cautiously, that Shlenka should be replaced by Kirka as chairman of the village Soviet, the whole of Shirokoye welcomed the idea, and even Zakhar Kataev voted for Kirka. The only man in the village whom Kirka avoided, and of whom he always spoke in derisive tones, was Stepan Ognev.

"Kirka's gone away from us, they've stolen him from us," Ognev said.

"And what a treasure they've stolen," Kirka answered mockingly, and went on his way with greater determination, conscious that the whole village supported him. He was planning to grow beetroots and poppies on his land next year, and to use the money he would obtain by selling them in order to rebuild his house. Then he would marry and have children.

"Only first of all I must arrange my house and holding, and then it will be as easy to choose a girl as to choose a saucepan in the market."

For a long time he had been strongly attracted by Steshka Ogneva, by her supple back, her thick plait, her charming gaiety. Whenever he saw her, he grew confused, stammering when he spoke to her. At evening he would sit moodily at his door, trying to distinguish her voice from among the many voices of the young girls at the evening gatherings. Then . . . then came Whitsun, and everything was changed. The very next day Kirka noticed the difference in Steshka. From that day his love for her was quenched in regret and disappointment.

That morning Yashka had asked him to persuade Yegor Stepanovich to agree to his marriage with Steshka. Kirka felt that he would burst from rage, as a water-melon bursts when it is ripe.

"He's snatched my bite away from under my very nose,

and now he wants me to chew it for him. Go to the devil," he wanted to shout but, instead of anger, a feeling of warmth overcame him, a desire to do something good (this happened fairly frequently, and Kirka often scolded himself for it); he agreed to use whatever influence he possessed over Yegor Stepanovich.

Now that Yegor Stepanovich himself had settled the question, the two of them walked out into the street. Kirka tapped Yashka on the shoulder.

"Well, now Steshka's all yours. What god will you thank for it?"

"Perhaps she's mine and perhaps she isn't. The devil knows what the old man will do yet."

"He'll be all right, and if he isn't, you must force him. Look here,"—Kirka drew from his pocket the report concerning the calf-leather boots and the lime bark—"if he makes a fuss, you can use this to strengthen your arguments. And one day you'll do me a good turn. Now I must go. I've also got something——"

"What?"

Kirka smiled and shook his head. "It's quite true what the old people say, that women make a man blind and deaf. You know, I'm not an empty ear of wheat. . . . Who's that knocking?"

Ilya Maximovich was sitting in his house, rapping at the window.

"Well, Yasha, let's be friends and give us your fist. I must go. Ilya Maximovich is calling me."

Kirka entered Plakushchev's house. It reeked from the fumes of home-made spirits, and was dense with the smoke of coarse tobacco. Chizhik jumped up from his seat at the table, waving his arms in a noisy greeting to his cousin Kirka. Nikita Gurianov, neglecting for a moment the plate of gingerbread, banged his fist on the table.

"You know, Kirill Senafontich, you're still only a suckling —no, don't get angry. . . ."

"You mustn't be offended by an old man," Kirka answered with a smile.

"That's right." Nikita swayed unsteadily. "Yes, you're only a chicken, you know, and we've made you the chief man in our village. Do you see what power we have, eh? What power!"

"Do be quiet!" Plakushchev's wife interrupted him. "Do

be quiet!" She placed a dish of cakes on the table. "Please sit down, Kirill Senafontich."

"No! Kirya, Kirya, stop where you are. Stand up in front of the old men, and don't you turn up your nose at us. We. . . we can do anything. . . . Gold. . . . Come here, Kirya, my falcon, let me kiss you." Nikita dropped back on to the bench. "What a business it is! Brought up a daughter, and now I must give her away. I'm giving away my daughter, dear comrades, my Nastya." He dropped his head on to the table and sobbed.

"Sit down, Kiryushka, sit down." Ilya Maximovich pushed a stool across to Kirka. "Zina, bring another glass and a fork. Perhaps you'd like a bit to eat, Kiryusha? Eh? Won't you? Well, have a drink. No? Don't you drink? Well, come, let's clink glasses——"

"No!" Nikita Gurianov raised his head. "You must drink with me, with me, to celebrate this day."

As she handed him the glass, Zinka blushed deeply. Kirka looked up at her healthy, glowing face, and his heart beat faster.

"How she's grown," he thought. "How she's come up."

"Kirka, Kirka,"—Nikita pulled him by the sleeve—"Come on, here's to you."

The home-made spirit was thick and reddish, like rust; Zinka was leaning forward, her eyebrows were broad and straight, and her firm round breasts stretched the linen of her dress. . . . Kirka stared at her and swallowed the contents of his glass in one gulp.

"There you are," Nikita cried. "As soon as the young people get together they start playing hide-and-seek with their eyes."

"What are you talking about?" In his confusion Kirka filled his glass again and grew still more shy and uncomfortable when he realised that he had helped himself to the drink. Blushing and laughing, he said unsteadily: "I'm all mixed up!"

"That doesn't matter, brother, it always happens like that," Chizhik squeaked.

Involuntarily, Kirka's eyes followed Zinka's retreating figure.

"That's how it happens. You're not expecting it, you're not even thinking about it . . . and it's all over with you."

They sat there for a long time, drinking, shouting, kissing

each other. Zinka came up to the table more frequently. She had put on a new dress, and her movements were more restrained, more graceful; her eyes glittered. Once, as she handed a plate of cakes to her father, her breast accidentally touched Kirka's shoulder. She lingered there for a moment. Kirka leaned back and looked tenderly into her grey eyes.

Ilya Maximovich had observed everything; on one pretext or another, he kept Zinka at the table.

"It would be fine," he thought. "Very fine!"

Yegor Stepanovich entered the hut and peeped cautiously into the room where the merrymakers were seated. He winked to Ilya Maximovich.

"It's like this," he began, when they were outside. "You know, I've got some bark in my shed; I've had it there a long time. . . ."

"From the old regime?"

"Ye-es."

"Well, what about it?"

"Well, about our agreement," Yegor Stepanovich whispered. "Those spies have drawn up a report about it; they'll drag me into court, and you're in it, too!"

"Hi, Kirka, don't stare at the girl," Nikita cried. "Look at him! Get hold of her!"

"Oh!" Zinka squealed.

Yegor Stepanovich peered hastily through the crack of the door and saw Zinka struggling in Kirka's arms.

"It concerns you too." He turned back to Plakushchev. "We'll both be disgraced. . . . We'll have to see Ognev."

"Kirka," Nikita shouted. "If you like we'll marry you. Come on, it won't take a minute to hitch you up together. Well, do you want to? Speak up, man! Ilya Maximovich," he called, coming to the door, "will you give your daughter to Kirka, eh? Kirka,"—he looked back—"we're going to marry you, the devil take you!"

"Get married, brother," Chizhik squeaked. "Do marry her."

Ilya Maximovich's head worked more rapidly than a mill can grind corn. No, it wouldn't be bad at all.

"Wait a bit, and don't make a nuisance of yourself," he said to Nikita. "They know themselves what they want, and they've got tongues of their own. Get away, now,"—he pushed Nikita back into the room and shut the door. "It's a bad business, Yegor Stepanovich, about this bark. I know

it's not from the old days. You can't keep lime bark all that time. And you might get two months for it. And there's not much hope of doing anything with the chairman now. Besides, Yakov knows. What can the chairman do? He can't hush it up; the group men will find out all about it, anyway, and that's the end of him."

"Ilya Maximovich, come back. Come in, Yegor Stepanovich, you're just in time for a wedding. We're going to marry off our nephew Kirka," Nikita shouted.

Yegor Stepanovich's face turned a sickly green. He shook his head.

"So you think there's nothing to be done about it, eh?"

"It seems like it. We must get round it some other way. Perhaps . . . it might be better to let Yashka have his own way."

"Yes, yes." Yegor Stepanovich swallowed and ran home, spitting on the ground several times. He reached his house in a state of fury.

"He's trying to swindle me. All right, we'll see. Yashka!" he called into the shed. "Have I got to tell you everything a dozen times? Go and call the marriage-makers, and let Ognev know. You can have her."

He wanted to take back the words the moment they had been uttered. His anger and annoyance grew until they seemed to make a furnace of his body; he could not drive the words he had spoken out of his mind.

5

The marriage season was opened by Vasska Darin. With Nastya smiling at his side, he drove his *troika* several times up and down Krivaya street, and the bells rang out gaily. This exhilarating farewell to his youth intoxicated him. He urged his horses forward like a man possessed; the grey mare swished her tail as if driving gadflies away from her hindquarters. When Vasska reined in at the little village church, the animal dropped its head and seemed to grow smaller, like an exhausted mouse. But that didn't matter—here was Nastya, her eyes shining, her young hands trembling.

To the general astonishment, Kirka Zhdarkin and Zinka Plakushchev followed Vasska and Nastya. Ilya Maximovich himself drove their *troika* through the village—such a thing had never before been seen in Shirokoye; and the peasants

remarked slily upon this strange departure from their customs. They ran out into the street, gasping enviously at the sight of the fine black horses. Under Plakushchev's expert guidance, they dashed along the streets of Shirokoye, sending up a whirling cloud of fine snow, and Ilya Maximovich's white beard streamed in the wind like a pennon.

"He's caught a son-in-law at last. And now he's afraid the hook will snap, so he's driving them himself."

Half the village was present at Kirka's wedding. The large gates were opened. "Let them all come, whoever isn't too lazy, and whoever isn't my enemy." And they came, bringing spirits and meat, gifts for the bride and bridegroom. For a whole week the rejoicings went on, until they were all quite senseless.

After that there were too many weddings to count. The people of Shirokoye went from house to house, eating and drinking as if they had been starved for weeks. The peasants from Zaovrazhenoye made peace with the peasants from Krivaya; they rode from Shirokoye to Nikolskoye and from Nikolskoye to Alai, from Alai to Shirokoye. The streets thundered from early morning until late night with singing, shouting and fighting. At night bonfires flared up, reddening the snow. Near the church in the ravine, in the exact spot where his mother had died, Shlenka was almost frozen to death. Nikolai Pyriakin had done his utmost to tear out Chizhik's beard, and Mitka Spirin's wife had started a love affair with young Gorka. Mitka beat her soundly in the sight of all the villagers. At morning the women gathered at the spring, weary and hoarse. Hastily they drew their water, and smiled to each other.

"There's no one to light the fire!"

"They've all gone mad," Grandfather Katai said. "That means we're going to have another war. They'll bring a lot of children into the world, and then they'll start another war."

"Well, what about it?" Nikita Gurianov said. "There's enough fighting as it is whenever they have kids. . . ."

6

Crossing the ice at the spring, Yashka pressed Steshka tightly to him and said: "To-morrow, Steshka, you can expect the marriage-makers." That was all he said, but

when they reached the bath-house he kissed her hotly several times.

The following evening Steshka lay on her bunk, thinking of what Yashka had told her.

"Oh, Yasha," she whispered, "what a wonderful boy you are."

Grusha was busy at the oven, preparing supper; the table was already laid. Stepan got up from the bed, stretched himself and glanced out of the window.

"There's a heavy frost again to-day, and we haven't got much firewood left."

Omitting grace, he sat down at the table. In the corner a cricket chirped.

"That brings luck," Gresha said from the larder.

"Don't you count on that," Stepan said with a smile. "He's been chirping there for years, and we're still eating cabbage soup."

"Come along, Stcshka," Grusha called, placing a bowl of soup on the table.

"I don't want any."

"What's the matter, my little dove? Don't you feel well? Come on, the soup's lovely to-day."

"It might be better," Stepan laughed.

But Steshka would not eat. She watched her father listlessly sipping the thin, greyish soup and listened to the cricket chirping in the corner, and Zhdanka, the calf, lowing outside the window. Her brother Sergei had sent money to buy a cow, but the money was not enough for a cow, so Stepan had bought a calf. Soon the calf would grow into a cow, and have calves of its own, so they called it Zhdanka (waiting).

"As if they didn't know anything," Steshka thought indignantly. "They eat and eat." Angrily she twitched her new apron. "That's all they care about."

"Mamma!" she cried, so loudly that she herself was startled. "Zhdanka's mooing," she added softly.

"Well, what about it? Let her!"

"All right . . . poor thing. . . ." And whether from indignation (was it really possible to sit down calmly at the table and eat at such a moment?) or from the strain of waiting, the tears rushed to her eyes and ran down her cheeks.

"What's the matter, dear?" Grusha came up to her.

But Stcshka was not listening. Her heart had began to

beat rapidly, in an unpleasant sort of way, as if she were being pursued by a bear.

"Was he telling me lies? But why should he lie to me?"

"So that's that!" Stepan put down his spoon and wiped his beard and moustaches with his hand. "So the marriage-makers are coming round to-day. . . ."

Grusha glanced at Steshka and then at Stepan. Youthful joy sparkled in her tired eyes.

"Who is it?"

"Chukhliav."

"Oh!"

"Yashka told me to-day; but I don't quite know. . . ."

They were silent. The soup grew cold. A smile played among the shadows of Grusha's face. Steshka slipped down from the bunk and went into the other room. Pressing her face against the cold window, she stared out into the dark night.

So it was true!

Beyond the allotments, the young people were singing to the accompaniment of a harmonica. The harmonica wheezed, the voices of the girls were clear and ringing; the boys sang lustily.

Somebody rapped on the gate.

"Clear up, quick; they're coming!" Stepan said.

Steshka trembled. Grusha had not time to replace the bowl in the larder when the door opened and the marriage-makers entered, enveloped in a cloud of frosty steam. The first to enter was Arkhip, Yegor Stepanovich's brother; he was followed by Markel Bykov, Klunya's brother, and Yashka's cousin, Vassili Smorchok; then came the women and Arkhip's wife.

"We wish you all good evening," Markel Bykov said, in a nasal voice, shaking the icicles from his long beard. "Will you receive us?"

"If you've brought nothing bad with you," Stepan replied with a smile. "Good evening, Markel Petrovich; good evening, Grandfather Arkhip. It's a long time since I've seen you. . . ."

"Oh no. We haven't brought anything bad. I'm right, aren't I?" He turned to his companions.

"Well, then, come along in," Grusha said. "You are our welcome guests."

They sat in the front room. The air was filled with the

smell of sheepskin coats and the winter freshness. Steshka hid behind the stove and Grusha brought in the lamp. The lamp cast moving shadows on the walls and the beetles rustled loudly as they scurried back to their cracks.

The guests took their places. Markel and the sharp-nosed widow Elka sat under the ikon. This made their position clear.

Along the street some doors slammed; then the gate squeaked and the marriage-makers on Steshka's side came into the hut. Grigory, Grusha's brother, came with his wife; Nikolai Pyriakin, the priest and his wife, who was Steshka's godmother. Grandfather Katai came in last; he was Steshka's godfather and had strictly forbidden his godchild to marry without his consent. When he heard that Yashka Chukhliav was to marry Steshka, he went off to the Ognev's without heeding the advice of his family, who tried to dissuade him.

"We won't give her up easily," he said, putting on his coat.

They all sat down again. The priest drew nearer to the stove, shaking his small head and crossing his plump arms over his prominent stomach. His wife sat at his side, pressing her thin lips together.

"Well, here we are," Markel began, stroking his beard. "So shall we start? Well, how shall we begin? It's like this —well, we can say: You have the good——"

"That's the old-fashioned way," Nikolai interrupted him. "We've done with that."

"All right," Markel said. "Let's take it according to the decrees. We'll do that if you like. Well, where's the bride?"

"And where's the bridegroom? Let's see the bridegroom," the widow Arina twittered.

"The bridegroom has given us full power."

"That's right. We are fully em-pow-ered," Markel stroked his beard. "Well, and what about the dowry?"

"Oh!" Arina exclaimed. "You have to give that."

"Oh no," Markel drawled. "That's the old-fashioned way. Now it's the bride who has to bring the dowry."

Everybody laughed. So Markel wanted to make a little revolution of his own? Some head the man's got!

"Well," Markel continued, "she's going to marry a man. . . ."

"Go on, Stepan." Arina nudged him. "Why don't you say something?"

"Go on, you carry on. . . . Grandfather Vavil is our

chief man, let him speak first." Ognev placed his hands on Katai's shoulders.

"All right," Katai agreed. "Give me the counting-frame."

"Never mind about the counting-frame," Markel said. "You tell us what dowry you will give the girl."

Grandfather Katai pondered awhile; then he turned slowly towards Stepan and Grusha. Grusha flushed and said hurriedly:

"Everything will be hers."

"Oh no! You must put your cards on the table. Anyone can say, everything will be hers."

"And then she mightn't get everything, after all."

"What more do you want?"

"All right," Katai said, having whispered to Grusha. "A looking-glass."

"We accept." Markel bent one finger.

"Five dresses."

"We accept."

"Well, a table, six chairs, a satin quilt, bedding, two pillows."

"A silver tea-service and a golden watch," Markel put in, and everybody burst out laughing.

"That's good," Grigory said. "We accept, and you must bring a thousand roubles."

"But the feather-bed must be made of down." Markel laughed, as he bent another finger.

"Now, stop joking," the priest's wife exclaimed. "Markel, do behave properly. This is a serious business, and you're making jokes."

"All right, mother," Markel answered in the same laughing tone. "They've done the serious part of the business themselves, and there's nothing left for us to do but laugh."

"Well, and what can we expect from you?" Katai began, when the laughter had ceased. "Curtains," and he moved a bead along the frame.

"What do you want curtains for? Funny habits you people have got into."

"What do you want chairs for then?"

"I'm all in a sweat." Markel threw off his coat. "Come on. Now, it wouldn't be a bad thing if you gave the bride a silver spoon."

"We've got one, but it's all scratched and bent," Grusha laughed.

"A sheepskin coat for the bride," the priest's wife said.

"Do we accept?" Markel asked, looking round.

Vassili nodded. "Yes, only you must wait till we can get the sheepskins."

"Fifty roubles." Katai counted off the beads. "Leggings and galoshes, clothes, a bucket of wine, spirits,"—he looked across to Ognev—"four buckets."

"That's a fine offer."

"Look here, you'd better let me have the counting-frame," Markel drawled. "Those beads can say anything."

"What about you?" Grigory said. "Now it's your turn."

Markel spoke to Vassili in low tones. Then he stood up.

"Well now, listen to my dictation. We accept the coat, only it will have to wait. We accept twenty-five roubles, leggings and galoshes. We accept curtains and all the rest of it. . . . Only we'd have to go to Nikolskoye for the wine, and that's too far, and costs a lot of money. And the spirits can be made here."

"How can Stepan make the spirits? He can't."

"Then what do you want the coat for?" Arkhip's wife cried. "I'm an old woman, but I'm ashamed to go out in a fur coat."

Everybody began to speak at the same time, screaming like chickens frightened from their coop at night. Markel's voice rose above the confused clamour.

"Look here, I want an answer. . . . I think Comrade Lenin also. . . Stepan Kharitonovich, listen to me. I think you've forgotten that Comrade Lenin said we mustn't grab things. . . ."

"He told us to have pity, and God blessed his words," Arkhip said.

"You count up, Stepan Kharitonovich, you're asking more than a hundred and fifty roubles. We wouldn't mind a hundred. . . ."

They argued back and forth for a long time, waving their arms and interrupting each other. Then Grandfather Arkhip stood up and walked to the door. His companions followed him. As they went out, Steshka's heart beat violently and her hot hand pulled Grusha behind the stove.

"Mother, they're going away."

In the yard Markel held a council of war. His nasal voice rose high above the others. In the hut the bride's kinsfolk were gathered around the priest's wife.

"Don't give in," she chirped. "Don't give in. They had

over six hundred puds of rye this year. Why don't you speak up, Stepan?"

"What can I say? It's all funny to me. She's our only daughter, and he's Yegor Stepanovich's only son; and we're here bargaining how much money we should take out of one pocket and put in the other. One hundred, two hundred—does it matter? All the same, they'll have everything in the end."

"Well, that's nonsense," the priest's wife said. "It's silly what you say."

"All right, if it's silly, do what you like. I agree to everything."

"Daddy," Steshka whispered, "Daddy, how nice you are."

Her face puckered by the effort to restrain her tears. Grusha pointed to her stomach: "I carried her here, and I brought her up, and now——"

"Well, well, mother,"—Katai stroked her shoulder—"you can't expect to keep her with you till you die. That's why we have children, so that they can marry."

They spoke for a long time, and then were silent, sitting near the priest's wife.

The door creaked, and the marriage-makers re-entered and took their places again.

"Well, have you had a breath of fresh air?" Nikolai Pyriakin asked.

"Yes," Markel answered gloomily, "and we've come to a decision. We accept everything from our side, except the sheepskin coat. . . . There's no need for it."

"Look here," Katai protested. "You're going back on your own word. Let's begin all over again. A hundred roubles——"

The shadows danced over the walls, and Katai's voice was drowned in the general uproar.

"Look what a family she's coming into. Why, it's a real treasure. . . ."

"She won't be their pet," Arina squeaked.

"And warm boots for the bride."

"No, you'll have to give her the boots yourselves."

"Do you expect her to be married in those thin shoes?"

"We'll bring her in a cart; she won't get frozen."

"And how much spirits?"

"We told you already—four buckets."

"Then you'll have to make it yourselves."

"The battle for the spirits has now begun," Markel boomed. "I can see the militia having a word to say about that."

"You can make it from honey, from honey. It isn't forbidden to make honey spirits."

"Well then, make it."

"We were married during the famine," Vassili's young wife cried. "We got *kvass*, and we put pepper in it; that gave it a good sting, and it only cost us three puds all together."

"Well, that was during the famine. You could get anything for grain."

"We drunk three puds' worth," the young woman continued, blushing deeply, "and you want two hundred puds."

"Stop, stop! Don't all speak at the same time," Markel cried. "It's quite clear you don't want to make a match, you're putting obstacles in the way all the time. Well, look here, I'll make it clear. We accept fifty roubles, a sheepskin coat when we can get the skins, and all the other things; but no spirits and no wine. Do you agree to that? It's dangerous to have the spirits. You can go to prison for it, and wine is too dear."

"Well I never," Grigory exclaimed. "Do you expect us to drink hot water at the wedding?"

"Hot water will do—why not?"

"You might scald yourself." Nikolai Pyriakin raised his voice. "It isn't the proper way at all. . . ."

"Nikolai wants a drink, he's very partial to a glass now and again."

This remark angered Nikolai. Had he ever drunk for somebody else's money? No, always for his own. Nobody could reproach him on that score. And anyway, why were they so obstinate? Had they come here to swank and fool about? Everybody gives wine for the bride at a wedding. And Yegor Stepanovich wouldn't burst, even if he did splash twenty roubles.

Nikolai wanted to say this, but it was useless to try to talk above the shouting of the others. Obstinacy and anger blew through the room like an icy draught.

"I'll give you five puds of grain," Stepan said suddenly. "You can make the spirits from that, Vassili. When you're making some for yourself, make for me also. That will settle the matter."

"So that's what you want!" Vassili grew purple from

anger. "Perhaps you'd like me to cook the soup and everything else as well? You want other people to make the wedding for you? No, we don't do that sort of thing nowadays."

Everybody was silent, looking at Vassili; it was Stepan's turn to grow angry.

"What do you mean by other people?" He moved nearer to Vassili. "Do you think he's the only young man in the village? Do you think,"—Stepan's lips trembled in indignation, and excitement prevented him from finding an appropriate insult to hurl at Vassili—"Do you think——" Suddenly he drew himself up, his lips grew firm, and he said in a hard voice: "Two hundred roubles. Two hundred roubles. There isn't only one bridegroom in the village."

"Oh, my God!" Steshka whispered, shivering like a lamb lost in the snow. "Oh, my God!"

"You mustn't throw insults about like that," Katai shouted. "I won't allow it. We're giving the girl—all milk and honey. You won't find another one like her in the whole district."

The marriage-makers began to put on their coats. The men pulled their caps down firmly over their heads, the women knotted their kerchiefs, and they all moved towards the door, their shadows climbing up the bare wooden walls.

The door creaked, and Yashka stood on the threshold, steaming frostily. His cap was perched on one side of his head. There was complete silence. Yashka looked at Stepan and Grusha.

"Well, haven't you finished bargaining yet?"

Slowly, one after another, they resumed their seats again.

"Where's Steshka?"

"There!" Grusha pointed to the stove corner.

"What's up? How long has all this been going on?"

"It's about the spirits, Yashka, the spirits," Markel replied.

"We must have the spirits."

"Of course," Markel agreed, "we can't celebrate anything without that."

"And the militia?" Vassili queried.

"What about them? How frightened you've got of the police all of a sudden!"

"Shall we treat them, too?"

"Of course, don't you know that?"

"Well then, let's shake on that." Markel rubbed his hands together.

The priest's wife rose. She knew that Yashka's mother adhered to the old belief. Although Yashka and his mother had both been baptised, the priest was not received in their house. In all probability this was the fault of Yegor Stepanovich, who called all priests skinflints and grabbers.

"Now I want to say a word or two. She asked me to, Steshenka. The priest must come into the house, otherwise the marriage will not take place."

"Who's talking about that?" Katai growled. "That's the religious side." He fingered the newspapers which were lying on the table. "Stepan Kharitonovich, how long have you been getting these papers?"

"Quite a long time," Stepan said, with difficulty restraining a smile.

"The religious side!" the priest's wife screamed. "She won't get my blessing without it, and without it she won't get married."

"That's all nonsense," somebody put in from the corner.

"Won't she?" Yashka asked, growing pale.

"And do you expect him to put his own mother to shame?" Vassili said.

Yashka drew the confused and tearful Steshka into the centre of the room.

"Did you hear what she said?"

In silence, Markel drew his fingers through his beard, frowning gloomily at the floor; Stepan turned away. The rest were silent, staring eagerly at the young couple. Yashka bent his head, and put his arms round Steshka's quivering shoulders.

"Will you?"

"Of course," Steshka said softly, adding in a still lower voice: "I'm trembling all over."

Yashka glanced triumphantly at the priest's wife, who turned away angrily and pulled her husband by the sleeve. He waved her aside, and his thick lips parted in a smile.

"Times have changed—leave me alone."

"That's the stuff, father," Nikolai Pyriakin said. "Nowadays everybody goes his own way."

The peasants began to laugh and talk to each other.

Arina asked for candles to place before the ikon. Markel

fumbled in his pocket—he was churchwarden—and produced a candle-end.

"You've been carrying it about with you all over the place, and now you want to offer it to God."

"God won't mind, He isn't very fussy."

The candle-end burnt dimly in front of the shabby ikon.

Somebody suggested that Yegor Stepanovich, Klunya and Yashka's other relatives should be sent for. It seemed that Yegor Stepanovich had been detained somewhere. Nikolai Pyriakin and Grigory brought in some tables and benches from the neighbours, arranging them in the two rooms while the women busied themselves with the pots and pans. The logs blazed in the stove—some soup had to be prepared to celebrate the occasion.

The feast began.

Yegor Stepanovich sat between the young couple and Klunya. Some of the women, half drunk, came up to him and sang songs, asking for money. Yegor Stepanovich pretended not to hear them and turned away or paid them with jokes. Towards the end, when eight buckets of spirits had been emptied (by that time nobody knew or cared to whom the buckets belonged), Yegor Stepanovich rose and approached Ognev.

"Hallo, you old falcon," he cried. "Falcon . . . but I used to catch birds in their flight. . . ."

"What's that? Tell us all about it."

"Yes, I did. . . . That's the sort of fellow I was. You ask my wife—ask her, she'll tell you something. . . . And my Yashka. And I must tell you, Stepan Kharitonich, your Steshka would never have got hold of my boy,"—Chukhliav raised his right arm and wagged a bony finger in the air—"if it hadn't been for something . . . something . . . we're taking her out of the gutter, your Stepanida."

He stopped, realising that he had gone too far. Although Ognev was drunk, Chukhliav's last words had wounded him deeply. In any case he was sick of Yegor Stepanovich and his everlasting boasting.

"That's right, we live in the gutter," he agreed.

Chukhliav began again.

"Yes, yes. And you ought to thank us for taking her out of the dirt. Yashka, did you hear what your father's been saying?"

Yashka frowned. Around him the peasants were laughing, singing, stamping their feet.

"Only we're not in the habit of hiding other people's boots," Ognev added softly and burst out laughing.

The words were spoken quietly, but Yegor Stepanovich heard them distinctly and understood; he frowned, nudged Klunya and rose from the table. Everybody who saw Yegor Stepanovich go out thought that he wished to retire behind the shed.

7

"Stepan! Hi, Stepan!" Grusha shook him angrily. "Get up! Get up, can't you?"

The spirits had given Stepan a terrible headache. When he opened his eyes Grusha bent over him and whispered that something had gone wrong at Chukhliav's house. When Yegor Stepanovich left their hut, he had locked himself in, and would allow no one to enter. He declared quite definitely that he had no intention whatever of becoming a kinsman of the Ognevs; if anybody else wanted to, let them, and be damned to them. Yegor Stepanovich will manage quite well alone. Thank God, he won't have to go begging, he said, and he'll always be able to get somebody to do a bit of washing for him in return for a loaf of bread. Yegor Stepanovich would never lower his head before that tramp Ognev. He hadn't even let Klunya or Yashka into the house.

"So that's it!" Stepan sprang up. "That's what he's up to!"

Steshka was sleeping behind the stove. She opened her eyes, and saw a splash of sunshine on the ceiling. Remembering the events of the previous evening, she waited impatiently for the door to open and the merrymakers to fill the hut again. Then her attention was caught by the conversation of her parents.

"It's a dreadful shame," her mother said.

"It isn't the shame that matters," Stepan growled. "But I'm sorry for her. Why do old people always interfere in the young folks' affairs?"

"They know," Steshka thought. "They've learnt about everything."

Hurriedly she dressed herself and crossed the room. The door creaked and Yashka came in.

"Hallo!" he said, gruffly.

Steshka clutched the handle of the door with rigid fingers. She grew pale.

"What is it?"

"What's the matter, Yashka?" Stepan asked.

Yashka sat down on the bench, and looked round slowly, his eyes lingering on Steshka. Then he raised his hand and clenched it into a large, hard fist.

"That old iron devil won't have the wedding."

"Oh!" A frown gathered between Steshka's eyebrows, her chin grew wrinkled like a complicated knot. Grusha's eyes filled with tears, like little puddles in the thaw. The wind whistled shrilly in the chimney, then everything grew so still that Steshka's heavy breathing could be heard. In the corner the cricket began to chirp.

"Pour some hot water on it," Ognev said to Grusha, and turned back: "Well, Yashka, we might have expected it. What are you going to do about it? Have you also changed your mind?"

"Oh, Uncle Stepan! I'll never, never leave Steshka. She . . . she isn't my bride, she's my wife. She's been my wife for a long time now. You must understand that."

Grusha screamed and dropped the dish which she held in her hands. The fragments scattered over the floor, and tears ran down her face. Of course, she had noticed something. Steshka had said queer things in her sleep lately; she had talked about babies—why should a young girl talk of babies? So that's what it was! No, she was not angry with Steshka, she remembered how deeply she had loved Stepan before they were married. A girl doesn't think much when she's in love. Still, she had not allowed matters to get so far. At her wedding the marriage-makers had had no opportunity of presenting a broken glass to Grusha's parents.

"Well, what are you crying about?" Stephan cut short the thread of her memories. "Come over here and sit next to me, Yasha." Yashka sat at his side. "You ought to have told us a long time ago," Stepan continued. "It's a pity the old man doesn't want the wedding, but who cares? Your hands are young, you're strong, you've got every chance of standing solidly on your own feet." He was silent for a moment. "Grandfather Khariton used to say to me when I was a boy: 'Stepashka, when you grow up, the chief thing is not to crawl about on all fours. If you fall down, jump up

again quick, never crawl. When you're down on your knees, people peck at you like geese.' "

Yashka raised his head, looked at Stepan, Grusha and finally at Steshka. Steshka's lips were quivering, her nostrils dilated, her greenish eyes were wide, half in fear, half in joy, seeming to retreat still farther into the bluish rings which encircled them.

"Just look at your arms." Stepan caught one of Yashka's hands and raised it over his head. "They're wagon shafts, not arms. You don't need a plough with hands like this, and yet you're downhearted. If I was twenty years younger, I'd show you."

Yashka laughed. After all, the world wasn't all upside down, nor was there any gulf between Steshka and himself. There was Steshka, pretty and dear to him, he had only to stretch out his hand, and they would live together till their death. Everybody in the world was born without a single stitch to them—look at Kirka Zhdarkin. He came back from the front as naked as on the day his mother bore him, and now, just see how splendidly he had managed his affairs.

He laughed again, and Grusha smiled to him. She felt a motherly love for Yashka, and now he was dearer to her than before. Steshka laughed, too.

"You're silly children, you youngsters," Stepan said. "You don't know the law at all. You're not living under Ivan the Terrible, but under the Soviet power; so let's go to the Soviet. We'll call Zhdarkin; he'll marry you, although you seem to have done it yourselves pretty well already. and if that old growler won't let you into the house, we'll take it to court. Come on." Stepan's voice rang out as elatedly as a child's. "Get a move on."

He put on his torn sheepskin coat. Yashka's anxiety had completely vanished; everything which Stepan had suggested appeared so simple, so ordinary and necessary. He put on his cap and nodded silently to Steshka, saying with his eyes: You dress and come along.

"But," Grusha said, "but . . . we ought, oughtn't we——"

"What is it," Stepan smiled. "Do you want to bless them? All right, bless them, but hurry up about it."

Two young heads, one small, with thick curly hair, the other large and shaggy, bowed before Grusha.

That night Ognev gave up his bed to them. Grusha

covered them with her sheepskin coat and her hot tears fell on Steshka's cheek. Steshka squeezed her mother's hands. Later Stepan heard her whisper;

"Father's so good, he won't drive us away. We'll work with him, he won't leave us in the lurch. But I'm frightened of your father, of Yegor Stepanovich. Yesterday he gave me such a look, as if I'd set fire to his house."

Stepan moved closer to Grusha and stroked her wrinkled face with his calloused hand.

8

The following morning a malicious and mocking whisper travelled over the village. It started from Akulina Chessalkina's door and, gathering weight like a snowball, rolled from house to house, from street to street, along the paths and lanes and over the snow-heaps, until it stopped at Yegor Stepanovich's house and tumbled inside.

"Yashka's gone to the Ognevs. The Soviet in the morning and bed at night. What a son! And what a wedding! They're like two dogs, sniff at each other at the corner of the street, and go off together."

Yegor Stepanovich gritted his teeth and advised Markel Bykov not to meddle in other people's affairs, but to look after his own daughter-in-law, Ulka. When he was alone, he sat down under the ikon, racking his brains.

Yes, two blows had fallen on him at one and the same time. Yashka had gone—a part of himself had been torn from him, and in what a fashion! If that son of a bitch had at least given some indication that his father meant something to him, something more than . . . than a stone on the Balbashikha hills. The other blow was still heavier; it had been dealt by Plakushchev. A fine act of friendship. Yegor Stepanovich was standing on the edge of a precipice and Ilya Maximovich, out of kindness, had pushed him over. . . . Well, he was rejoicing a bit too early. It wasn't so easy to get rid of Yegor Stepanovich: Plakushchev might hurt himself. And if Yegor Stepanovich made up his mind to push someone over, there would be no doubt about the matter. The blow would get home.

But how? How could he bring back that part of himself which had been torn away? How could he regain Brusski? How could he contrive that the rest of Ilya Maximovich's

beard should be scattered over the earth by the wind? Plakushchev was very powerful in the village now: his son-in-law was the chairman, obeyed by everybody, and Yegor Stepanovich was quite alone, an old grey wolf, hunted down, and although he had teeth, they were broken. . . .

Several weeks passed. The hair on his temples grew grey and the wrinkles on his forehead more numerous. The day came when he could bear it no longer.

"He's gone to the Executive Committee, our good-for-nothing son," he growled to Klunya as they sat at dinner. Immediately fury possessed him, because he had spoken to his wife, and because Klunya had raised her head in astonishment. But having begun to speak, he continued in a hoarse and angry voice: "That's all Stepan Ognev's doings. Well, what are you glaring at? It's all him. 'You go and get a paper to say you can have a half of your father's house,' he told him." Chukhliav shook his head in rage. "You'll get half of this house. You'll get it, just you try. I'd rather set fire to the place, and then you can run to your Committee and see what they can do. And your village Soviet. What do I care? Did your Committee slave to build this house, or did I?"

"Don't get so upset, old man." Klunya's voice was weak and broken. "All young people are the same. He'll come back; after all, he's our own flesh and blood."

Her quavering voice, and indeed anything Klunya ever said, aggravated Chukhliav's bad temper.

"How do I know if he's my flesh and blood?" he hissed. "God only knows where he came from."

Klunya's eyes dilated with horror; she raised her right hand.

"Most likely he isn't mine at all," Yegor Stepanovich shouted in exasperation. "He looks like a cross-breed."

"What are you saying? What are you saying?" Klunya made the sign of a cross over him. "Come to your senses."

"Don't you make the cross over me."

"To talk like that, with one foot in your grave. To disown your own son, that's the only thing that was missing."

"Don't you make the cross over me, I say. I've been christened already. You'd better do it to your son. He's gone into that fellowship, do you hear? In summer they had to pawn their trousers, and our good-for-nothing son's gone and joined them. Only give him a half of everything; just

give him, so that he can throw it to the wind. You've lived and laboured and saved—even now you've still got sores on your breast—and give it all to him, so that he can leave you to beg in the streets in your old age."

Klunya's patience was exhausted. She had been silent for so many years, so many that she had lost count. Often at night Yegor Stepanovich would lie at her side, pawing her body, and when he had taken what he wanted, he would turn his back to her and snore like a pig, or slip into the other room and sit at the window through the hours of the night, guarding his property. So many years, and all her life Klunya had been silent.

"You're a torturer," she burst out. "You've ill-treated me all my life. You've ill-treated everybody."

Yegor Stepanovich's eyes protruded as if the bench in the shed, on which he sat whenever he was particularly worried, had suddenly begun to speak.

"What?" he screamed. "Clear out! Clear out! You get out, too! All of you clear out! So I've tortured you, have I? I've tortured all of you? What are you sitting there for? Run after your son, run after him, and I——"

Klunya's mouth opened. She wanted to hurl at her husband bitter words which had been stored up in silence for many years, but Yegor Stepanovich rushed to the table and seized the lamp.

"I'll burn everything. Everything, to spite you. Oh, so you're frightened now? Where's the lamp? I'll burn everything."

He realised that he had said "lamp" instead of "matches," and suddenly his rage crumpled away. He ran into the shed and sat down on the bench.

"What is this Soviet power? What is it?"

The loneliness of a hunted wolf descended on Yegor Stepanovich. Grief and anxiety oppressed him. It seemed to him that the slated roof, with all its burden of snow, the oaken beams of the ceiling and the pale sky were weighing down upon his head, engaged in a conspiracy to crush him.

Perhaps Yashka was right? Perhaps Yegor Stepanovich's old age had betrayed him, and there was nothing left for him in this world but to groan and die? No, Yegor Stepanovich would not groan, still less would he slip the noose about his own neck. But something must be done. He would not

shamble from corner to corner like an old man eaten up by lice; he would not grind his teeth in helpless silence, powerless against his enemies.

He sat in the shed for a long time, seeking for something at which to grasp, to cling to. At times his thoughts were disturbed by the sound of Klunya's weeping, but it passed by him, leaving no trace, like a cloud over a clear sky. At twilight he rose, hearing footsteps behind the fence, and looked through the window into the lane. The river watchman Kuzmich was passing by.

"He's the man," Chukhliav thought with relief. "He's a cunning devil, but he goes about a lot with those people."

Hurriedly he crossed the yard; Kuzmich was at the gate.

"Come in, come in, Abram Kuzmich. There's something I want to talk to you about."

Kuzmich hesitated, but Chukhliav pulled him by the sleeve and drew him towards the house.

"Don't you want to know us these days? . . . Klunya, get the samovar ready. We old men want something hot to warm us up."

He slipped a key from the bunch in his pocket and handed it to Klunya. Klunya was astonished, both because he had entrusted her with one of his keys, and because he had asked her to prepare the samovar.

"When you've taken out the samovar, don't forget to lock the cupboard up again."

She took the samovar down from the top shelf and looked inside. Spiders had spun their webs there. She shook the samovar; the spiders fell out and ran over the floor. Klunya trod on them with her bare feet and poured water into the samovar.

The samovar bubbled gaily, the steam rose with a playful hissing sound from the two holes in the lid; the ceiling was covered with beads of moisture, as though it were sweating. This annoyed Chukhliav; he closed the holes and the samovar, as if offended, began to whimper.

"Listen, Abram Kuzmich," he began. "You see a lot of those people, those governors. Now you explain to me how it is. They say the laws let a man live as he likes, so long as he doesn't interfere with others and looks out for thieves. . . . Full freedom for the peasants, and learn from us how and what. . . . Well, what do you make of it all, Abram Kuzmich?"

Kuzmich removed the saucer from his lips and his small, sharp eyes glanced at Chukhliav over its edge.

"It's true, they're all moving somewhere. . . . But it's very hard to say where."

Chukhliav was aware that Kuzmich knew very well the direction of that movement, and was silent only from peasant cunning. Yegor Stepanovich hovered about Abram like a hawk; he spoke of all the river watchman's relatives, praising them highly—his father was a thoroughbred and his brothers the hardest workers in the village. Then he reached Kuzmich in person—there was not a finer man than Kuzmich in the whole village. Village? Why, in the whole district you couldn't find another such head. Abram leaned forward and whispered into Chukhliav's ear:

"Things are moving all right . . . and pretty quick, too. Those bourgies will take everything back, everything, and they'll leave these Soviet people in the government, but the bourgies will make the wheels go round. . . ."

Chukhliav was thinking of his gold—his three thousand roubles. But he did not speak of that.

"Oh!" he said, with a smile. "And I thought you belonged to their religion. And then fancy! Look at you!"

"Oh no!" Kuzmich bent his head lower, spreading out his fingers. "Oh no! This is my line. Every man looks for his own way and if he finds it he sticks to it. Doesn't matter what government there is, red or green, he sticks to his own road, with any government." He leaned back and repeated emphatically: "A man goes his own way with any government you like. A government's only a government."

Chukhliav clapped his hands.

"You're quite right, quite right."

"Yes," Kuzmich continued. "Go your own road. If there's a hole in front of you, jump over it or get round it." He moved his fingers rapidly over the table, to illustrate his point.

They drank tea. They drank until they had to tip the samovar. Chukhliav wiped the sweat from his face and again questioned Kuzmich.

"And now tell me, Abram Kuzmich. How is it nowadays about dividing up a man's property? Is it in order?"

"Well, what shall I say? They do say it's quite in order." His eyes moved shiftily. "Besides, how can you tell what is in order these days, and what isn't?"

"Well, I'll put it to you straight. Can you drive a man out of your own house."

"What's it all about? Are you thinking about dividing up your property?"

"I'm talking about driving a man out, and you talk of dividing."

"You keep to your own road," Kuzmich whispered. "What's a law after all? You can twist it this way and that. That's just why they are laws. Don't you understand? If you don't they can drive you out of your house all right. And don't you drive him away. Don't! Let him come. And then you can go about it slowly, one way and another. You can even wear a stone out drop by drop, they say. And you —I know you." He pushed Chukhliav away and laughed loudly. "All right, let him go to court. And when you're in court you say: 'I didn't drive him away. He's only a youngster still, and it's all because of his youth he turns the whole house upside down.' And then the judges will tell him he's too young. 'You're too young, Yakov,' they'll say, 'too young to manage the household.' Now do you understand?"

Chukhliav nodded.

"You must never leave your own road."

When Kuzmich had left, Yegor Stepanovich walked up and down the room, waiting for Yashka. The following day he was still waiting. The boards creaked under his feet, and the thoughts in his head seemed to echo their creaking.

"Yashka will come back all right. He'll pretend to be sorry, and say: 'Forgive me, father!' And then I'll forgive him. He'll be so surprised . . . and then we'll see."

But Yashka did not return. On the third day Chukhliav found the strain intolerable.

"Go and call him," he said to Klunya. "I'm not a wild beast. Let them come."

At evening Klunya brought the young couple home.

Yegor Stepanovich sat under the ikon, reading his psalter and humming nasally:

"Halleluja, halleluja, halleluja!"

Yashka glanced at the bed and turned to his mother.

"Mother, you make the bed. Get a new blanket and put up some curtains. We'll sleep here, and you can manage on the bunks."

In his corner Chukhliav trembled in anger. He wanted to

cry: "What do you think you've come back as? Are you the master here or am I?" But remembering Kuzmich's advice, he controlled himself and growled:

"All right, you sleep in the bed. Only I've forgotten to get a fourth spoon. We haven't got four spoons."

"Me and Steshka will manage with one. It'll be sweeter that way, won't it, Steshka? What's the matter with you? This isn't a strange house. You've come into your own house, and you don't move from the corner, like you were a stranger."

"Your own house? You've got to get it first." The words seemed to choke Chukhliav, but he swallowed them. "You wait till you get the house, you puppy."

"Make the bed and sweep the floor. There's dirt everywhere." Yashka kissed his wife heartily, and patted her on the back. "Well, father, so we'll all live here."

Chukhliav shrank back in anger. His head shook, but he bent hurriedly over his psalter and began to mutter softly:

"Let every creature praise the Lord. . . ."

Klunya pulled Steshka gently by the dress and drew her to the larder. There, laughing and crying at the same time, she stroked her hair and cheeks, and her tears fell on Steshka's hands.

"I'll love you, Steshenka," she whispered. "I'll take care of you."

THE SEVENTH LINK

I

Spring came, grey and misty.

Walking along the street, the teacher Evdokimov said:

"Spring's here! It's easy to breathe, Yegor Stepanovich."

Easy! To a fool his own finger seems an iron rod. What was there so pleasant about spring, after all? Everything was damp; the peasants ploughed all day in the fields, squeaking like rabbits. Easy to breathe! "Harness yourself to a plough, and then you'd see how nice it is to breathe." And a learned man, too! What good was there in that? He ought to help a man to find out how things stand, and instead all he could say was that "It's easy to breathe, Yegor Stepanovich!" And how easy it was to breathe on Brusski! The fellowship had gathered together for the ploughing and they had been practically forced to carry the horses themselves. It was funny! How could they expect a horse to work when it had eaten nothing but weeds? While ploughing, Davidka Panov and Nikolai Pyriakin had quarrelled; their two horses had been harnessed to the plough and Davidka, walking behind them in the furrow, whipped Nikolai's grey horse, but took pity on his own beast. Sure enough, a man feels sorry for his own horse, and Nikolai resented the blows directed at his grey colt. By what right had Davidka whipped his horse? Their ear-splitting screams filled the air around Brusski. Stepan had made peace between them, but they were not really reconciled. Davidka had announced his intention of leaving the fellowship, and Nikolai's grey colt had met with an accident and was killed off. Kolya was good enough at catching fish, or lying on his back and staring at the ceiling, but he was a failure when it came to real peasant work; he would have done better to have stayed in Moscow as a stoker.

That wasn't everything; the previous day Stepan had sent Nikolai to town, in order to study! That was a joke, too. What was Nikolai, a little boy? Well, let him go, and let

Stepan go, too, for all that mattered! Ilya Maximovich Plakushchev was the real trouble; since the day that Yegor Stepanovich had been at his house, Plakushchev had not once even glanced at Chukhliav. Narrowly they observed everything that happened at Brusski, but when they met in the street, they ignored each other and looked the other way—enemies. Ilya Maximovich was the man to fear. It was whispered that he was about to organise a group, under his own control, to take over Brusski, and it was also rumoured that Stepan Ognev wanted to divide the Krivaya street into two parts: one under his own and the other under Plakushchev's leadership. Each man could choose the side he preferred, but he must remember that those who went Ognev's road would eat white bread, while those who followed Plakushchev's would live on dry crusts. . . . And Yegor Stepanovich, it would appear, was to be left in the middle, wobbling from side to side like a big thimble on a little finger. No! Yegor Stepanovich had no intention of occupying that position. After the conversation with Kuzmich he had decided what road to take. Long enough had he sat on the bench, counting the beetles on the wall; it was time to be up and doing, to set people in their proper place. He began to attend the meetings and to talk to the peasants in a quiet, casual way, as if talking to himself.

"I've got nothing at all against the fellowship; they can have this street as well for all I care. There's only one thing, and that is, they've taken a bit of land quite near the village, where we could have made fine fruit-gardens. They ought to go to Zolnika. That's far off? Well, what of it? Let them go there and give us an example. But here! Why, what they do here is like sitting down at a table with the soup all ready and the spoons handed out to them. And when they've gobbled all the soup they say: 'Look, we're setting you an example.' Still, I've got nothing really against them, all I want is peace in the village."

In the spring several peasants gathered about Yegor Stepanovich: Petka Kudeyarov, Shlenka, Markel Bykov. Although Bykov was wary of Chukhliav, as a young calf of the wind, he did not run away. Then there was Chizhik, who was angry with Kirka because at his wedding Kirka had suddenly asked: "Chizhik, when I was at the front, why did you pinch the planks from my roof?"; Kuzmich and his brothers. All together they made a considerable group, and

Yegor Stepanovich no longer felt himself to be a solitary warrior on the battlefield. It might even be wise to form another fellowship; it would be easier to surmount obstacles if he was not alone.

Yegor Stepanovich considered this project continually; he was accustomed to working alone, and it was no easy matter for him to defer to Shlenka and Petka Kudeyarov, or to persuade them to follow him.

Examining the young pumpkins, he crossed his allotment on Cow's Island and climbed over the fence which separated it from Plakushchev's land. There he stopped short; Stepan Ognev was descending the hill, two buckets of water slung on a pole over his shoulder. Ognev reached his allotment and began to water the cabbages.

"You'll rub your back sore." Yegor Stepanovich laughed softly, and added to himself: "You're a fool, Stepka, you ought to work in with me; you ought to give up Nikolai and Davidka. . . . Shall I talk to him? Good day, kinsman," he called. "Or aren't you my kinsman?"

"Good day," Ognev answered.

"Look here, why are you angry with me? It's better to be friends. We're both going the same road, and we're kinsmen, too. Let's dig the earth together."

"Madman," Stepan thought, smiling. He noticed that Chukhliav's hands were trembling, and his eyes darting furtively from side to side. "You're an S.R., you are, an S.R.[1] You stir up muddy water, and you don't care a hang who gets the stink of it."

"Don't you call me an S.R." Yegor Stepanovich frowned. "I'm not an S.R.—I spit on them. I'm ready to die for the Soviets, and anyhow," he stammered, and was silent, speaking only to himself: "Even a dog answers to a whistle, and Stepan's belly is empty. They've taxed him pretty heavily, and now's the time to get hold of him." He drew nearer to the other and said rapidly: "I can't live without work; I can't live without work. Take yourself, for example; suppose you're short of something, for the taxes or what not, and you come to me, as your relative, I'll help you. . . ."

"You scoundrel," Ognev laughed.

Yegor Stepanovich caught hold of the corner of Ognev's jacket.

[1] S.R. = Social Revolutionary. The name came to be used as a term of abuse after the collapse of the S.R. Party in 1917.

"Wait, you thickhead. . . ."

Stepan stopped and looked into Chukhliav's face; it was wrinkled and pitiful, like the face of the beggar, Pankrat. A wave of anger surged over Stepan; he wanted to swing his fist into that face, to make it flat as a pancake.

"Let go my jacket, it isn't a woman's petticoat." As he walked away, Ognev threw over his shoulder: "What I've got to say to you won't take long. I'm sorry I didn't put an end to a cur like you when I had the chance."

"Well, I can't get him that way," Yegor Stepanovich thought, as he looked round. "Good job there was nobody about to see us."

When Ognev had disappeared from sight, he whispered: "We'll see who'll put an end to who. We'll see!"

The bluish spring wind wandered over the fields, caressing the grey, broken fences of the allotments and stirring the dust on the rock of Stenka Razin.

Yegor Stepanovich ascended from the valley; as he came to the gate of his house, he called out:

"Steshka! Steshka! What's all this? Do you think you're living in an inn? Don't you know where the bucket's kept? Not there—here's the nail, hang it up here. That's right, you go on growling. I'll give you something to growl about."

2

"You old grumbler," Steshka muttered. "Nagging at me day and night."

She hung the bucket on the nail and hurried indoors to little Annushka. Annushka was nearly two months old. When she was born the news spread over the village like a peacock's tail.

"How can that be? It isn't six months since Steshka got married, and she's got a baby already."

"That's the Soviet fashion," Akulina Chessalkina sneered. "If a girl marries under the Soviets she's sure to have a baby in six months."

Well, let them say what they like, Annushka's eyes are large and slightly green, like her mother's, and her chin is round and firm, like her father's. Steshka spent her evenings sitting at the child's cot, singing softly and waiting for Yashka's return. Four months ago Yashka had gone off to the Caspian; he was working there and wrote to Steshka;

in his last letter he said that he would soon be home again. That had made her happy, and nobody knew why she went about with such a gay, contented smile on her face. One morning, at the spring, the women asked her why she looked so well, "round and rosy like an apple."

"Look at Zinka Plakushcheva, or Nadya Gurianova, or any of the others—they all dried up two months after their marriage, and you're all in bloom. How's that?"

"I don't know," Steshka answered, laughing.

Cautiously she bent over the cot, raised Annushka and put the soft, full little mouth to her breast, heavy with milk. She thought of Yashka, of his broad chest, his powerful arms and firm gait; she thought, too, of what her mother had said a few days before:

"All night long Stepan turns over and over in bed; he shouts in his sleep, and swears that he'd rather die than give way to Yegor Stepanovich, that it would be better to hang himself than crawl backwards like a crab."

The previous day, having heard of the trouble with Pyriakin, Steshka went to see her parents. Stepan was sitting at the window, looking withered and dry like a branch that has been cut from its tree. His beard seemed to have grown larger and more matted, his eyes seemed to have fallen in. When he saw Steshka he smiled and wanted to say something cheerful and affectionate, but only gloomy words would come. He waved his hand, and turned back to the window. When Grusha left the room, he turned to his daughter again.

"It's terribly hard, Steshenka. . . . I don't know if I've got the strength to carry it through. They're an ignorant people, dark and backward. A couple of days ago some fool broke all the glass in the vegetable frames. It's lucky there wasn't a frost that night, or else everything would have been lost. But, whoever did it, didn't do it for nothing. Somebody must have put him up to it. You try to do something good, to improve things, like getting rid of beetles, and the people turn on you. . . ."

He was silent.

"If your Yakov would pull with me, we could change the whole village. But it's hard with these people. Nikolai's colt is dead, and Davidka sulks all day long. I wouldn't be surprised if he left us." Stepan leaned forward. "You know what, Steshenka, you know we've got your cow, and I want to buy something. . . . Will you let me sell the cow? You

can tell mother that Yakov wrote and asked you to sell the cow, and when he comes home he'll buy another one instead. Yes?"

Steshka willingly agreed that the cow should be sold. She wrote to her brother Sergei in Moscow about it, and added in a postscript that their father was very restless at night, saying dreadful things in his sleep, because he found it so very hard to live. Could Sergei give her some advice, or do something about it? Couldn't he come to Shirokoye for a week and see to things himself?

Klunya came into the room and bent over Annushka.

"The little dove's asleep."

"Yes, she's asleep," Steshka answered softly, and put the child back into her cot.

"Cover her up, cover her up."

"She's quite warm, mother."

3

The gate opened and shut several times. In the evening twilight Chukhliav's companions met in the shed. Yegor Stepanovich dragged a table into the corner of the yard by the stable, placed five buckets of spirits on it and some plates of cabbage salad and tomatoes; then he ran round the table, making a final survey of the preparations.

"Help yourselves," he said quietly.

The guests hesitated. Chizhik was the first to take his place. He seized his mug with both hands and raised it above his head.

"To Yegor Stepanovich's wise head," he squeaked, "and to the whole company."

"Sh! Quietly," Yegor Stepanovich hissed. "There's ears everywhere."

The others followed Chizhik's example—Kuzmich and his brothers, Kudeyarov and Shlenka. Only Markel Bykov was silent. His lips were pressed firmly together under the curly beard, and his eyes were fixed gloomily on the corner of the stable. It seemed to Markel that he had started out upon the wrong road. But what could he do, when Yegor Stepanovich clung to him like a burr? How could he refuse? How could he say: "This is not my business, Yegor Stepanovich." They were relatives, after all, and Chukhliav might be useful to him one day. What did Markel care about Brusski?

The Tatars had used it for a latrine, and now Ognev had taken it. Well, let him. Markel was churchwarden, and wanted to start bee-keeping. Then he could finish his days in peace with the bees and the candle-box. . . . And they bothered him with this fellowship, which would only lead to more trouble, surely. . . . And just look at the men he had got together! Shlenka—he hadn't a grain of flour to his name; Petka Kudeyarov—was a cobbler a man? Plakushchev had thrown him off, and so he had come to Yegor Stepanovich. And Chizhik—he was as unreliable as a week with five Fridays. What a company! It would be best to go away; there's the gate; through the gate and home! "Good-bye, we go different ways." But his feet did not move, his tongue was still; only within him anger boiled and swelled like a raging mountain stream. At least, he would refuse to drink; nobody would force him to that, try as they might.

"I don't drink. I never touch the poison."

Yegor Stepanovich stared at Markel from under frowning brows.

"Come along, drink. I never touch it as a rule, but when it's necessary, well, it's necessary."

Markel only shook his head at each attempt to persuade him.

"Well, if he doesn't want to, we can't force him to it. You drink, comrades." Yegor Stepanovich smiled, surprised that he had called them "comrades." It was the first time in his life that he had used the word.

"Next thing I'll be calling them Communists," he thought. "Well, what must be, must be." He raised the mug to his lips.

They ate and drank. The whispering grew into loud speech. When they were more than half drunk, Yegor Stepanovich stood up.

"What do I want? If I had the power, I'd put things in their proper order. . . . But now . . . this power, this dictatorship . . . the workers have the power and the peasants pay for it and look on. We all know that a man looks after himself first . . . and if we had the power, me for example, I'd look after myself. . . ."

"Quite right, Yegor Stepanovich, quite right."

"That's the stuff."

"Stop," Kuzmich cried. "I'm the chairman, and I didn't

give you permission to speak, Petka. You stop it. Yegor Stepanovich, go on!"

"And anyhow," Chukhliav continued, "what am I? What I prophesy will come true. But I want my land all in one place. Now we've got it in forty different places, and you have to jump from bit to bit like a rabbit. No, that's not good government. If we were in power, we'd see that it was divided up again properly."

"That's right," Kuzmich put in, trying to stand up. "A few days ago the forest superintendent was telling me that the only way to Communism is over a new distribution of the land."

"One way, or the other. We'll soon be dead anyhow. But now——"

"I'm also in favour of that," Kuzmich remarked.

"Kuzmich, you're chairman, don't interrupt."

"If only we could divide up the land again," Yegor Stepanovich continued, "we'd show you what we can do. Then there would be a good harvest, for sure."

"You want to be a *kulak*, eh? A *kulak*?" Petka Kudeyarov sprang from the bench and rolled up one sleeve, clenching his fist.

"Lazybones! Lazybones and thieves!" Kuzmich yelled. "Wherever you turn, there's nothing but thieves, thieves!"

Petka gritted his teeth and rolled up the other sleeve.

"I wasn't speaking of you, I didn't mean you," Kuzmich said hurriedly. "I was just speaking in general."

"What do you mean by thieves, eh?"

"Petya, Petya," Chizhik squeaked. "It's very hard for you, very hard. . . . A house, a cow, a horse, twenty beehives. . . . I'll help you, Petya."

Chizhik threw his arms about Kudeyarov, repeating in a high voice: "A house, a cow, a horse and bees. . . ." Kuzmich continued to complain loudly of idlers and thieves; and Yegor Stepanovich, trying to pacify his guests, shouted louder than the rest. Only Shlenka was silent, his half-closed eyes wandering from the cabbage salad to the spirits and back again; he pushed the soft, squashy tomatoes down his throat with two wet, dirty fingers.

"Drink," he said, filling up the mugs. "What are you all shouting about?"

"That's right, let's have another drink," Yegor Stepanovich said.

They drank. Chukhliav took advantage of the pause.

"We must clear Ognev off from Brusski; we've decided that already. First we must clear him off, and then we can start our own fellowship on Brusski. We can say we were always Communists in our hearts, only Ognev was in the way and kept us back. . . . We'll go to the district and tell them that, and if that's not good enough we'll go to the capital."

"That's right," Chizhik agreed. "Yegor Stepanovich, you ought to be on the Central Executive Committee."

"You rogues," Kudeyarov muttered. "Rogues." But when he heard that he was to act as representative of the future fellowship, he held his tongue.

"Petka's just the man for it," Chizhik said. "He'll dress up in all his rags. 'I'm a proletarian, I am,' and he'll go off to the district. . . . And we must also settle affairs with Kirka. . . . What planks was it that I stole from his shed, eh? What planks? Just let him say that again."

Kudeyarov's cloudy eyes wandered from one face to another; dreamily he transferred the spirits from the mug to his stomach, and began to chew a tomato. He belched, and gave his consent.

"It's all the same to me, chairman, representative, or anything you like. We saw worse things than that when we were soldiers, when Nikolai was still——"

Petka was interrupted. When he was drunk he would always speak of his life in the old Tsarist army; but who wanted to listen to him, when each had his own exploits to boast of?

They drank, showering praises on themselves and on each other. Some of them vomited, and sat down again at the table to drink. You don't die of sickness, anyhow. . . .

Cautiously Markel Bykov stood up, pushed aside Chizhik's inert form, and went out into the street. . . .

Returning from his allotment some time later, Davidka Panov heard the noise in Chukhliav's yard. He deposited the empty buckets in the passage of his hut and slipped around the back to Yegor Stepanovich's shed. Having made a hole in the wattled fence, he peeped through and gazed for a few moments at the merrymakers. Then he stood up and whispered to himself:

"We'll elect you all as representatives, and as for you, Chukhliav, we'll knock so many nails into your bald head that you'll spend the rest of your life pulling them out."

4

The dogs howled that night. From end to end of the village echoed their deep, hoarse, fearful howling. The peasants knew it for an ill-omen, auguring trouble—thieves, wolves, or some such uninvited guests. Sleepily they crept out of their huts, examining by the light of the lanterns the bolts on the stables, driving the sheep out of the pens. Out of the pens, no thief could steal them, no wolf kill them; the sheep would bleat at the sound of approaching danger, and warn the peasants.

The howling of the dogs drew Ilya Maximovich to his feet. He made the round of the yard, patted the colt's neck and drove the sheep out of the pen. For a while he stood in the yard, listening to the howling of the dogs, then went indoors and lay down beside his wife; he could not sleep. Although seven or eight months had passed, Ilya Maximovich could not accustom himself to Zinka's absence from the house. He did not regret that Kirka had taken Zinka; Kirka was a strong peasant, and his family would be strong, but frequently Ilya Maximovich felt a great desire to pat Zinka's cheek, as he patted his colt, and she was not there.

"The world's a queer place," he thought, staring through the window at a distant star. "You bring children into the world, and you rear them, and when they're big enough to stand on their own feet, they go off to a stranger's house. Lisaveta," he called to his wife, "Lisaveta!"

Elisaveta was fast asleep, breathing deeply.

"Dead asleep."

Plakushchev rose from the bed again and went out into the yard. Night hung dark over the village, but the sky had a reddish tint, like the bottom of a huge rusty pail pricked by silver nails.

The dogs howled. Beyond the village hungry wolves crept forward towards the houses, grinding their teeth. The leader of the pack was an old, grey-haired wolf, limping on three legs. His exploits had made him famous in Shirokoye. The previous year he had wrought havoc among the sheep belonging to Tatiana Trubka and Nikita Siny, and the year before that he had been caught in the shepherd Fila's trap. The wolf had bitten off the imprisoned leg, and made his way back to the forest. Now, whimpering softly, he limped forward, sniffing at the fences; when he reached Yegor

Stepanovich's shed he stopped; he could smell sheep. He ran to the fence: there was a hole in the fence, and beyond were the sheep. Three-legs moved back slightly, then advanced cautiously on his belly and pushed his head through the hole. The sheep moved uneasily and saliva ran down from the wolf's tongue.

In a few moments the pack had demolished the fence and thrown themselves on the sheep. . . .

Driving the cows to pasture in the morning, the women saw the remains of the wolves' feast. They brought the news to Yegor Stepanovich. Chukhliav put on his cap, stiffened by wire, and ran out. Eighteen sheep had been killed. A low, rumbling sound issued from his throat:

"Gr-r-r-r."

He pulled the peak of the cap lower over his eyes and crossed the hemp-field at the edge of the village. Walking along the grassy, deserted paths, the field was soon left behind, a small, receding patch of green. Beyond it, the huts lay scattered over the valleys and ravines of Shirokoye. Thin spirals of smoke rose from the chimneys; the women were lighting the fires and no doubt talking about the misfortune which had befallen Yegor Stepanovich. Oh yes, and no doubt they were laughing at him, too. He turned off from the path, walking wherever his feet might take him. The branches of the young oak trees clung to his homespun trousers and red shirt, thrusting him backwards. Pushing them aside, Yegor Stepanovich forced his way through the thicket and down into the Dolliny valley, tracing a black furrow through the delicate lacework of the bushes which clothed its sides.

The sun had risen high, licking the dew from the leaves. Transparent mist rose from the valleys and ravines; behind Balbashikha dark clouds fought like dogs on leash, piling themselves up into heavy grey masses which stood out like stone boulders against the morning blueness of the sky. The wind rose, bending the young hazel trees.

Yegor Stepanovich did not hear the muttering of the clouds. He crossed the valley and came out on to the Vinnaya field. At the other side of the field he stopped. Before him the ground fell steeply down to the Pine Ravine. Above the oak thicket on the other side of the ravine two blackbirds and a large crow were pursuing a vulture. The vulture, ignoring their screams, circled higher and higher,

almost disappearing into the blue depths of the sky. Then, like a stone, it swooped down.

Involuntarily Yegor Stepanovich recalled Sutiagin's words: "Life has gone by just like that vulture turning himself on the post." He stared down into the ravine and thought: "It would be best to throw myself down."

Suddenly he drew back, shuddering like a terrified cat. Among the bushes at the bottom of the ravine, the three-legged wolf was sleeping, breathing deeply and evenly. The skin of its belly, spattered with the blood of sheep, was stretched tight like a drum. The hair rose on Yegor Stepanovich's head.

"I'll kill the cripple!"

Quietly, without removing his eyes from the sleeping animal, Chukhliav lay down on his stomach and wriggled over the ground to the oak tree which spread its shadows over that end of the ravine.

"I'll get down into the ravine from that end, and crawl along the bottom. He's stuffed full, the hound, it won't be so hard to do him in. If only he doesn't wake up. If only I can get near the lame beast."

He crawled forward softly and cautiously. Even a crow, perched on a stone near the oak tree, remained undisturbed.

The oak tree at last; its green branches spreading wide like gigantic paws.

"I'll catch him," Chukhliav thought. "I'll take him back to the village and free the peasants from this three-legged criminal. Then all the peasants will give me something, a lamb perhaps, and by the summer the lambs will be sheep, and I'll have my sheep back again."

He paused, listening. His heart beat like a smith's hammer ringing on iron. He did not notice that the clouds had gathered darkly overhead, that the shadow of the oak tree had faded, and the hazel trees rustled in a peculiar way, softly, but very distinctly. The wind rose.

And suddenly—crash!

Yegor Stepanovich fell forward, his face against the hard clay, and grunted. A blow fell on his head, and his cap flew aside, the metal wires twisted, and fell with a hissing sound on to a stone. That was the only thing Yegor Stepanovich saw, the only thing that he remembered. He did not see how the roll of thunder wakened the wolf, which glared at Yegor Stepanovich, growled, drew back and then ran limping

along the ravine. Nor did he see Markel Bykov and Petka Kudeyarov run down into the ravine, claw the earth with their hands and lay him, Yegor Stepanovich, in the hole they had made.

5

It was a holiday, and the warm, pleasant spring rain had freshened the earth until it bloomed like a young woman. The woods and fields were green. Through the puddles that pitted the streets of Shirokoye, the peasants ran to Yegor Stepanovich's house. Pressed close together in the yard, a solid wall of human beings, they chattered to each other. His relatives entered the house. And how could it be otherwise? It was such a rare, such an extraordinary occurrence, unprecedented in Shirokoye: a man had suffered serious injury because of his cap, you might say, because it had a metal wire frame.

On the bed in the corner of the room lay Yegor Stepanovich, dry and withered. The remains of his hair were grey, his goat's beard had been bleached a dirty white colour, and his face was distorted in malevolent anger. He was capable of only one thing: he opened his eyes, observed those present with a venomous glance, and whispered:

"*Kvass.*"

Klunya sat at his feet. The ends of her kerchief, tied under her chin, stood out like rabbit's ears; the top part was pulled low over her eyes. Opposite her stood Ilya Plakushchev; he had come to visit the sick man—such an accident might happen to anyone. Combing his fingers through his beard, he stared at Yegor Stepanovich as if it were the first time that he had ever seen him. At Plakushchev's side stood Markel Bykov, Kudeyarov and Grandfather Katai.

"And only yesterday I quarrelled with him. He took my bark, or he wanted to take it. I gathered the bark, and he wanted it for himself. What a sin!"

"Never mind, Grandfather, it isn't the time for that now, not now. . . ."

"Clear out now, clear out! What are you all crowding in here for? You can't breathe in here."

The men and women stared still more obstinately at Yegor Stepanovich, stretching their necks like geese over a fence.

"And you know, we were just in time." Petka Kudeyarov was relating the story for the fiftieth time. "But we put him in the earth, and that brought him round."

Groaning and elbowing aside the peasants, Shlenka forced his way into the room. Twisting his cap in his hands, he looked at Yegor Stepanovich.

"How did it happen?"

"You've been told a thousand times already." Plakushchev waved him aside, and turned to the crowd at the door. "Go on, clear out! You can talk outside!"

Shlenka squatted down in a corner by the stove and began to smoke, but after a few moments crushed the cigarette under his bare heel.

Yegor Stepanovich moved and raised himself slightly. The blanket slipped from his shoulders, exposing the prominent bones of his chest and the two large hollows at the base of his throat.

"Ognev," he whispered hoarsely. "To say good-bye."

Klunya stirred and groaned.

"I'll go, I'll go," said Ulka, Bykov's daughter-in-law.

The crowd parted, making way for her. Lifting her skirts, she ran along the street towards Ognev's hut, her bare feet pattering over the damp ground.

"Where are you off to, Ulka?" the peasants asked.

"Uncle Stepan—Ognev. He wants to say good-bye."

"It seems he's going to die then," the villagers murmured and crowded more closely around Chukhliav's house, pressing against the doors and windows. It grew dark in the house.

"Is it the end?" Markel asked, bending towards Plakushchev.

"He ought to know. It's a pity. It's all through these troubles, because he didn't know when to stop. What a man!" He turned suddenly, and rapped on the window. "Get away! Clear out of here!"

The faces at the window did not move. Ilya Maximovich shrugged his shoulders.

"They wouldn't budge if you threw hot water over them."

"How did it happen?" somebody in the crowd asked again.

"How many more times do you want to be told?"

"Uncle Stepan," Ulka cried, pushing her way into the room.

At Ognev's appearance Bykov and Plakushchev came forward and shook hands with him. They placed a stool close to the bed, and drew to one side.

"Don't argue with him, Stepan," Katai whispered. "Don't argue. He's at his last hour."

"Good day, kinswoman," Stepan greeted Klunya.

Yegor Stepanovich opened his left eye, looked at Ognev and recognised him. The eye burned with malice. Then he opened the other eye, raised himself slightly and muttered:

"You're glad. . . I'm going to die, eh?"

Ognev's whole body was covered in sweat.

"Yegor Stepanovich," he said softly, after a short silence, "you sent for me to say good-bye. It's all the same to me. You called me. You wanted it."

Chukhliav's head fell back on the pillow. He lay motionless for a short while; then, sighing deeply, he raised himself again and lifted an emaciated hand.

"It's gone. Brusski's gone. I give Brusski away." He was silent. "Eh, Stepa. What land it is! A long time ago we rented it from Sutiagin, my father and me. What crops we got!"

Tears ran down his wrinkled face, like water pressed from cream cheese; his hand trembled and fell limply over the side of the bed. Something bitter and hard swelled in Stepan's throat. He felt a great pity for Chukhliav, and at the same time he longed to run out of the house, to run away.

For a long time Yegor Stepanovich lay in silence, his eyes closed. The others were silent, too, breathing deeply and evenly. In the stillness the breathing of the crowd outside could be heard, slow and rhythmical, like bellows worked by a lazy smith. Klunya pulled the black kerchief, spotted with white, lower over her eyes; her body seemed to have shrivelled. Katai trailed the toe of his boot along the mud-filled cracks between the floor boards. Rising from her stool, Steshka listened anxiously, her lips parted.

"Let me pass, let me get through," a voice cried in the passage. "What's happened here?"

The crowd parted rapidly, as if a gigantic hedgehog was cutting a path through the peasants. Steshka screamed and darted forward; her arms wound themselves around Yashka's short, sturdy neck.

"Oh, my darling!"

At night, when the people of Shirokoye had gone home,

Yashka and Steshka lay behind the curtains, whispering softly to each other. Annushka was sleeping between them. Yashka had brought back a hundred roubles, some woollen stuff to make a dress for Steshka, and some blue sateen for Annushka.

Steshka stroked his strong, hairy chest, kissing him and laughing softly.

"What a beard you've grown, you porcupine!" She rubbed her hot cheek against his unshaven face.

Yashka raised himself slightly, and took her head between his hands; Steshka's hair spread over the pink pillowcase like a thick skein of silk.

"You . . . Steshka?" he asked quietly.

"What?" Joy and fear were mingled in her eyes.

"You . . . nowadays, you know . . . young women."

"Yasha! Only you! Only you, dearest!" She leaned towards him and closed his lips with her mouth.

Breathless from her kiss, he laughed:

"Put Annushka in the cot."

Steshka lifted the child and carefully laid her in the cot. Her nightdress slipped down, leaving part of her back bare.

The whispering continued.

"Now we'll buy a horse, and we'll join the fellowship. Let's first see what's going to happen to him. Perhaps he'll die. Then we won't have to leave the house. It's hard to live without your own house."

At the third cockcrow they fell asleep, and early in the morning the young husband and wife went to Ognev's hut. The samovar was bubbling on the table; the sun threw a bundle of rays into the window, and the golden light played over the grey wall. Laughing and crying at the same time, Grusha pushed a dish of fried potatoes towards Yashka, spread a towel over his knees, as for an honoured guest, and did not once take her eyes from his sun-tanned face.

"And is that sea very far away?" she asked.

"Very far, not less than fifteen hundred *versts*."

"And can't you see anything there?"

"Only the water all round, and you can't drink it, it's bitter."

Grusha gasped and shook her head, but Stepan sat with a worried expression on his face, drinking his tea hastily and staring out of the window.

"And now,"—Yashka turned to Ognev, having concluded

his account of the Caspian—"now I want to buy a horse, and join you in the fellowship."

Ognev's eyes sparkled. For a few moments he stared at the sunlight on the wall, then pushed his glass of tea aside with a vehement gesture.

"A horse? Yesterday, when I was coming home from Alai, I saw Pavel Bykov on his knees by the church rail. I stopped and asked him: 'What are you doing there, Pavlushka?' 'Well, you see,' he says, 'I want a horse as big as a house, and a cart as big as the street, and I'll harness the big horse to the big cart, and then in one journey I can carry all the sheaves from the field.' At first I laughed: 'You young fool,' I said, but when I went on I got another idea. 'It isn't only in Pavel's silly head,' I thought, 'the idea of such a big horse. Every peasant wants one like that, only he keeps quiet about it.' You see, everybody has got about forty different bits of land, and if you want to thresh a hundred puds of grain, you have to go to the fields about fifteen times just to get the sheaves. . . . It's funny."

Ognev was silent, staring out of the window. Yashka was puzzled. He had expected Stepan to be pleased by his offer, to encourage him. He wanted to reply and hesitated, seeking the right words. Stepan began to speak again, quietly, as if thinking of something else.

"And there is such a horse . . . there is, a good horse."

"What are you talking about?" Grusha said. "Is that a riddle?"

"Riddle?" Ognev laughed. "Everything seems a riddle to us, but there aren't any riddles. It's only our ignorance, our foolish old habits. We must have a tractor, Yashka,"—he slapped Yashka on the shoulder. "That's the horse for us. And you talk of a horse. And I was also stupid and I brought horses from the town, and look what happened. Nikolai and Davidka don't want to look at each other any more, they've quarrelled, like little children. Now I must go to the town again, and ask for a tractor. Perhaps they'll give it to me, and perhaps they'll say: 'No, you've had enough, we give you once, and we give you twice, but you've had enough.' Anyway, I'm going now, or else I'll miss the steamer, and have to wait a whole day on the landing-stage. Don't be angry with me, Yashka, for what I said." Stepan put on his grey jacket and threw a small sack over his shoulder. "I'm telling you the truth, we must have a steel horse."

6

In the village it was whispered that Yegor Stepanovich's life hung by a thread; soon he would go to his eternal rest. Akulina Chessalkina spread the rumour most zealously. Several times a day she ran to Chukhliav's house and stood in front of Yegor Stepanovich, shaking her head.

"Oh yes! He'll die. . . . It's quite true he's dying."

"We must all die," they answered her.

"Of course, we must all die," she agreed.

Grandfather Maxim Fedunov came several times. Yegor Stepanovich had once borrowed half a rouble from him, and had failed to return it. Grandfather Maxim came to visit him, hoping that at his last hour Yegor Stepanovich would return the fifty kopeks.

Chukhliav groaned and moaned, but would not give in. Klunya screwed a ring into the ceiling above the bed, to which a towel was attached; clutching at the towel with dry, bony fingers, he would raise himself from the bed.

"I'm not going to die. Just to spite you I won't. You're all waiting for my death, and you're waiting also, old woman. If I die I won't forgive you. We'll meet in the other world, and I'll tell everybody: 'This is my legal wife, she hounded me into my grave.' "

Klunya fell at his feet, sobbing and imploring his forgiveness; but Yegor Stepanovich withheld his pardon and grinned at her.

Sunday morning, when the cracked bell over the little church sounded its broken summons to mass, Yegor Stepanovich, having emptied a mug of *kvass*, began to twitch feverishly at the blanket, and at his sleeves, as though the clothes were covered with wisps of straw which he wanted to shake off.

"Well, mother, it's gone so far. So far. Now there's nothing left to look forward to."

Klunya burst into tears, while Akulina ran to fetch the priest. Hearing that Yegor Stepanovich's last hour had come, Grandfather Katai came to take leave of him. He sat down by the bed, looking at the waxen face with its sunken eyes.

"Yegor Stepanovich," he said softly. "Listen, what about the funeral? Do you want to lie next to your father, next to Stepan? Where do you want to be buried?"

"No, oh no! You can call all day, you won't get an answer," Klunya said, each syllable punctuated by a sob.

Her answer irritated Katai. What did the old woman mean by interfering in that way, before he had said good-bye to Yegor Stepanovich?

"Yegor Stepanovich, my dear man, tell me your last wish. You can't die without a last word."

Chukhliav opened his eyes.

"*Kvass.*"

"What?"

"*Kvass.*"

Avidly, without drawing breath, he drank the bowl of *kvass.* When he had finished, he stared at the corner of the room, sighing deeply, then at the towel which swung above his head. After a long silence he expressed the wish to be buried at the side of Sutiagin. He had spent half his life with the landlord, and besides, they had been friends. That was his only wish. His property? Nowadays, a man does not dispose of his own property, everything is upside down; whoever he might appoint as his heir, those group men would see that the man they chose should get it all. He would have liked to upset their plans, to set fire to everything, rather than. . . .

"His mind's beginning to wander," Katai thought.

"Hallo, Yegor Stepanovich," Plakushchev said, in encouraging tones, while he was still at the door. "Don't you give in. Drive the old plague away."

"Drive it away? Look! All my veins are bursting. . . ."

"Tie them up. If a rope or a bit of string breaks in two, you don't throw it away, you tie it up again."

"You're quite right." Yegor Stepanovich smiled, but a blue shadow ran over his face. Father Kharlampy stood in the doorway.

"Who the devil brought him?" Chukhliav thought angrily. "They smell carrion like crows. . . . Sit down, father," he said quietly.

"Well, well, Yegor Stepanovich," Kharlampy began. "Are you getting ready for the journey? Do you want extreme unction?"

"It's a journey we all take," Yegor Stepanovich smiled grimly. He looked at the priest's protruding stomach, and began to speak of parish affairs. How were the collections? Bad? Well, that's bad! So you're hard pressed,

too? Well, have patience! God requires you to be patient.

He stared into Kharlampy's eyes.

"There's always time for that," he said.

"For what?" Kharlampy queried. Then guessing, he continued hurriedly, as if afraid of offending Chukhliav. "Oh yes, of course, plenty of time. Yes, yes."

Yegor Stepanovich sighed and declared that he had decided to wait a little; when it was necessary he would send for the priest.

For three weeks more he lay in bed, groaning continually. One day, when the other members of his family had gone to attend to the allotments, he crawled on all fours to the door and looked up at the sun.

"How he shines! He always shines and never burns out. But we burn out and go into dust."

He lay for a while in the sunlight, then with great difficulty rose to his feet. His thin legs trembled; slowly he moved across the yard. At the corner by the shed the broom rested against the fence. He had put it there himself, three weeks previously; the broom was very heavy, and Chukhliav's knees began to give way.

He swept the yard, and in the corner, by a heap of manure, he found a rusty five-kopek piece, adorned with the Tsarist eagles. Yegor Stepanovich rubbed the coin against the wooden boards of the door until it shone.

"Five kopeks. You can't buy anything for it, it's true. Still, it's a pity to throw it away. After all, it's five kopeks."

For a moment Yegor Stepanovich fancied that he was like that five-kopek coin; the idea lasted only for a moment, he drove it from him and turned in response to a knock at the gate. Shlenka shambled through the gate, sideways, like a whipped cur.

"Are you up?" he asked, while still some way off from the other.

"And you thought I was going to peg out? Don't you think it! Thunder and lightning can't hurt me."

"Yes . . . oh no. What? I'm glad you're up again."

"I know you're glad," Yegor Stepanovich growled, holding the coin tightly. "What did you come here for?"

"Ognev's disappeared," Shlenka began, glancing over the fence into Nikolai Pyriakin's yard. "He disappeared the same day he said good-bye to you. Nobody knows where

he's gone. Some say he's gone to Moscow, and some say he's hanged himself, out in the forest, because of all his troubles. He'd had enough of life."

"Well, if he's gone, he's gone. What about it?"

"Perhaps if he's not here the fellowship will break up, or something. And then we could do what we planned to do that other day, you remember?"

"What if it does break up? Do you think I'd go against my own relations for spite? Well, he's gone, and what do you want? More flour? I haven't any more! No more! Do you think I saved for you? What are you standing there for? Clear out. Go to the Committee for the Poor."

"They won't give me anything at the Committee. They say I'm against the government. 'You're on Yegor Stepanovich's side, you stick to him.' "

"Oh." Yegor Stepanovich frowned. "And what have I got? Do I keep a granary? Eh? And who gave it to me? You, all of you proletarians, chatter, chatter, chatter. 'It's our power, our power!' All right, but the others have got the bread, you good-for-nothing. Here you are," he held out the coin. "It's a Tsarist piece."

"What can I do with it, Yegor Stepanovich?"

"Oh, you're so rich? You don't want it? Well, I'll keep it."

Chukhliav slipped the coin into his pocket. A loud, rumbling sound came from the street. He started, thinking that the bell-tower had fallen down. But when he saw the peasants, men and women, boys and girls, running along the street, he called out:

"What's that noise? What is it?"

"The devil only knows. It's the fellowship dragging something along. It runs, and there's ploughs behind it, and on the ploughs there's boards, and on the boards there's Stepan Ognev."

"It looks like a cannon."

"No, it doesn't."

"It's a dragter, you idiots," Petka Kudeyarov cried, running to Ognev's hut, his dirty, tattered apron flapping at each step.

"Oh, a tractor," Yegor Stepanovich drawled, stepping back. He felt that his stomach was turning over inside him.

"Well, did you see it?" he asked Shlenka, who still stood at his side.

"Yes, I saw it. It's a machine."

"And did you understand it? No, you understand nothing."

"Oh yes, I understand." Shlenka scratched his ear.

"All right, clear off. Come back in the evening and bring a sack with you."

The peasants swarmed into Ognev's yard, as merchants cluster round a fine horse at the annual fair. Chizhik ran round the tractor several times, slapping the steel flanks. He wiped the sweat from his face and declared decisively:

"No, it won't go. In our fields it's torture with the horses; and this thing! Look at this big wheel! It will sink right into the earth."

"You wait and see how it works," Yegor Stepanovich muttered. The rattle in his voice surprised him; he coughed, and added softly: "One noose isn't enough for them, they have to put their heads in a second one. You have to unharness the horses in our fields, and they come along with a tractor. Wonder-workers! Pioneers!"

Davidka Panov ran up to Chukhliav, planting his bow-legs wide apart.

"You lump of snot! What do you know about it?"

The peasants sniggered. They laughed not so much at the words which Panov had used, as at the thought that he had dared to address them to Chukhliav. Yegor Stepanovich shrank back, drawing his head down between his shoulders. Standing at Chizhik's side, he appeared to be a second Chizhik, as small and as insignificant.[1]

7

Close to the tractor, which stood on Brusski, Ognev and Panov were dozing. Stepan felt that a huge ulcer was eating up his stomach.

"Supposing it doesn't work after all," he said, examining the machine. "They'll mock us to death. Chukhliav himself would drive us out of the village."

"It'll go all right, it'll go," Panov said, tapping the wheels. "Why shouldn't such a fine horse move? Just you think, if it wasn't any good, would the government advise us to have one? Our government wouldn't tell us to do some-

[1] Chizhik = the diminutive of Chizh, a siskin.

thing silly and harmful. How long shall we be paying for it? Two years? Well, we'll see."

Until dawn they sat by the tractor, talking and making plans for the future. As it grew light they could hold out no longer and, laying their heads on a log of wood, fell asleep. . . .

Wriggling forward on his stomach, Shlenka crawled up the hill that sloped down to the Volga. His large eyes gleamed palely from out of two dark hollows. Arrived on Brusski, he slipped noiselessly up to the tractor, raised the tarpaulin which covered it and drove his chisel into several parts of the machine. When he had finished, he slipped away again. Some small stones which his feet had dislodged rattled down the hill and fell into the water.

"Curse you," Shlenka muttered and ran hastily down the bank of the river.

Ognev started.

"David, are you asleep?"

"What?" Panov sat up.

"Are you asleep, I said. You're a fine watchman, you are. It seems to me somebody's been round here."

"Who could have been here? You're dreaming."

"Who? There're lots of people who could. . . ."

Ognev walked away. In the damp grass on the hillside he discerned footsteps. He stared down at the river-bank and at the Volga, grey in the early light.

"Somebody's been here."

"But who?"

"I don't know, only there are footsteps."

Panov shivered in the frosty morning air.

"Nikolai," he called, raising the flap of the tent. "Get up quick and give it a trial before the people come. They'll be here soon."

Nikolai Pyriakin tumbled out of the tent, hastily splashed some cold water over his face and dried it on the flap.

"It's a rough towel," he laughed, letting it fall, and walked to the tractor. Having poured in petrol, he turned the crank. The tractor groaned and trembled.

"Now then, Nikolai, use both your eyes. To-day's the exhibition. We've got to show them the stuff we're made of, we beggars and tramps," Ognev said.

"We've got to show our face," Panov called out, "whether it's a phiz or a mug."

"I understand. Do you think I don't understand?"

"Yes, yes." Panov was happy. "That's right. We'll show them how our Commune can grow bread out of stones. We'll make them understand, it's a crowbar to lift us to a new life."

The engine back-fired, shuddered and was still.

"Good God, what's the matter? Is it stopped up?"

Ognev trembled.

"Look out, you might be stopped up yourself." He turned towards Shirokoye and spat furiously on to the ground. "Foo! They're all coming here."

The rumbling of the tractor had drawn the villagers to their feet. Along the winding paths, across valley and ravine, raising the dust and calling to each other, they ran towards Brusski. The first to arrive were Petka Kudeyarov, Kuzmich's brothers, Chizhik, Plakushchev and Yashka Chukhliav.

"Well, you pioneers," Chizhik cried. "Show us your horse, and we'll see if it works better than ours."

"What's there to show?" Nikolai retorted. "It will dig through anything."

"Let's see it first," Petka laughed. "Or else we might dig through you."

Ilya Maximovich glanced from under thick eyebrows at the tractor. His arms were folded, and only his beard moved. The wind blew it to one side; long and white, it waved gently over his broad shoulder. . . .

"It won't go," Petka Kudeyarov cried. "Nothing in the world will make it go."

"Hitch your trousers up, they're falling down," Ognev advised him, and bending over Nikolai, whispered: "Well, Kolya? I want to sink through the earth."

"What can I do? You see I'm doing everything I can."

"Well, will it be long, Kolya?" Chizhik's voice rang out again. Other voices joined in.

"What is it? Won't she take the bridle?"

"Come on, let's help you."

"Harness yourself to it, Stepan, then it'll go."

"Never mind, it will go in the winter."

The laughter of the peasants riddled Ognev like shot. His lips quivered, the muscles of his face twitched and his hands clenched and unclenched.

"Don't worry me, all of you. You're as thick as flies round

honey," Nikolai shouted. "The devil knows what's the matter; there's something broken, I'm sure, but I can't find out where."

Like the patter of hailstones on a window, the voices of the crowd fell on the fellowship.

"Do you hear that, citizens? Something's broken!"

"It's always the same; if a thing won't work, they say it's broken."

"You pioneers! Go and pickle yourselves."

Nikolai glared furiously at the peasants and crawled under the tractor.

"Oh, its belly's out of order."

"Send for the vet," Chizhik advised.

"Ha, ha! That's two thousand gone west."

Ilya Maximovich opened his lips: "Two thousand? They won't have two kopeks to pay for it."

"They'll have to pay with the hair on Davidka's head," Chizhik laughed.

"Citizens," Yashka began in excited tones. "What are you bleating about? Perhaps something is really wrong with it."

"Sure enough there's something wrong," the peasants agreed. "They bought a plough and they got a fly-trap."

"Well, peasants, now you can see what a Commune means. Now we can go home and harness our horses, and that's how we'll plough the fields. This Commune will be here for a long time yet, we'll have plenty of time to come back and admire it." Plakushchev spoke contemptuously and turned away. Chattering noisily, the other peasants followed him.

Nikolai crawled out from under the tractor and shouted loudly:

"Somebody's been at the engine. You're fine watchmen, you are."

Hurriedly he turned the crank and jumped into the seat. The tractor roared and puffed; then it moved forward, and the two steel ploughshares cut into the old fallow land.

The people of Shirokoye ran back, and their shout of applause drowned the rumbling of the tractor. Half deafened by the encouraging din, Ognev ran behind the tractor, waving his arms like a windmill in a strong breeze.

"Carry on, Kolya," he shouted, with all his strength. "Carry on; let's show them. Speed her up."

The tractor, a huge, steel-grey beetle, moved forward

slowly, breaking the ground up evenly in its trail. In front, straight across Brusski, ran two old, hard paths.

The peasants did not move, following the machine with intent, wondering eyes. Chizhik fingered his cap and looked at the two paths.

"No, it won't be able to take them, it won't take them."

The ploughshares droned over the hard, rough crust of the paths; throbbing noisily, the tractor mounted the hill, breaking the virgin soil of Brusski.

"Look, it cuts ten inches deep."

"Twelve."

"It does cut, doesn't it?"

But Chizhik would not surrender.

"Of course, it ploughs all right, but look how slow it goes. You can work quicker with horses."

"Come along after me," Nikolai called to him.

Chizhik left the crowd and followed the tractor. Smiling, Nikolai glanced back over his shoulder and moved into second gear. Chizhik jumped forward, waving his arms; his feet sank into the soft earth of the furrow.

"Don't fall behind," the peasants cried. "Don't fall behind."

When the tractor reached the birch copse, Chizhik was gasping as if he had been carrying a heavy burden uphill.

"Shall I go quicker?" Nikolai called out.

"No-o. You'll only make the machine tired. . . ."

Chizhik collapsed breathlessly on to the ground.

The crowd accompanied Chizhik's struggle against the tractor with loud laughter. The tractor forged ahead, climbing the hill, until it reached the farther side of Brusski, leaving behind it a deep, broad furrow.

Unobtrusively, Yegor Stepanovich Chukhliav wriggled through the crowd. Ognev noticed him. Silently the peasants made way for him, and again the circle closed about the two men.

"Well, who's got the last word, eh?" Ognev jerked his head towards the tractor.

The peasants were silent, craning their necks forward. Chukhliav too was silent. Under the white eyebrows, his black eyes wandered slowly over the faces of the villagers, over the tractor and the field; again they surveyed the whole scene, and remained fixed on the tractor. Yegor Stepanovich shuddered slightly and drew his cap lower over his eyes.

"We'll see," he muttered. "Don't praise your dumplings before you've sown the millet." He folded his hands behind his back, and pushed through the crowd. "Let me get through."

In silence they made way for him, and silently drew together again. He walked straight across Brusski towards Shirokoye. From the distance it seemed that his hands were tied behind his back.

THE EIGHTH LINK

I

The years roll by, uphill or downhill; whichever way they roll, you cannot stop them. The huts grow old, and bend towards the earth; the corners rot away, shining smoothly in the evening light like fireflies. It's pleasant for the children, they run along the back yards, frightening the girls, who squeal. But there is joy as well as terror in their voices. The old people mutter:

"Everything's rotting away."

Bit by bit, the rotten, dilapidated huts are taken away, and new pinewood houses take their place, smelling of tar. Some built their new houses on the site of the old, and some lived their days through in the old huts, sitting at the window and staring out on to the world like cats. That wouldn't matter! They lived as their fathers and grandfathers had lived in the same huts, never seeing white bread, never knowing rest. That wouldn't matter either! If only the years would not fade into each other, if only the years would not run on in different directions. In Shirokoye, the years—and above all the thoughts—were tangled in each other like firewood heaped untidily over the floor. It was impossible to distinguish a beginning or an end. Once they had run on like the stream from its source, like the Volga: in the winter, silent under its icy blanket; in the summer, storming between its steep banks like foaming beer. Once everything —thoughts and plans—had flowed evenly in one direction; men respected the habits of their fathers, and honoured the inheritance bequeathed to them. Dying, they handed it on to their sons:

"The road that your father took is the road you should follow."

Now everything was confused and unintelligible. Village talk and village understanding had stopped in bewilderment, like a frightened calf at the cross-roads, staring with bulging eyes and longing to rush off. . . .

But where?

If only one knew!

The peasants of Shirokoye knew only one thing: beyond the village, on Brusski, where the red stones were once covered in thick weeds, on Brusski, where the landlord Sutiagin had lived, the tractor sang its iron song for the second summer. No flocks of blackbirds followed its path, no bast shoes shuffled through the furrows; the earth was no longer watered by human sweat, and the hum of the motor drowned the song of the larks.

The peasants came along the high roads, along the paths and over the fields, to watch the wonderful machine, to test the furrows with their rough, calloused hands.

"You can't get such furrows with horses."

"That's true you can't."

"It goes fine, doesn't it?"

"Look how it groans and snorts."

The song of the engine lingered in their minds like splinters under a nail. Some of the peasants had no rest from it. Sitting on the benches outside their huts at evening, they whispered to each other—casually, in passing, as it were—and the whisper crept from house to house, eating its way like fire. At evening, too, on the rock of Stenka Razin, the young girls and boys, to the music of the harmonica, would sing songs about the big, grey beetle—the tractor. Once, if you opened your window, you would hear songs about the slavery and the whippings suffered by the old men of Shirokoye; but now you hear quite other songs.

"Where do they get them from?"

"Who taught them to sing these songs?"

"They learn best what they're not taught."

"Yes, but where from?"

This thought burned into Kirka Zhdarkin's head like white-hot iron, leaving him no peace. For the third year Kirka was chairman of the village Soviet, for the third year he enjoyed the respect and goodwill of the village, for the third year he trembled over each pumpkin, ate only rye bread and, following Plakushchev's example, stored the grain in the barn and wore homespun linen trousers. He had grown thin, and his large head trembled on his stringy neck; but for all that, Kirka Zhdarkin had built himself a fine house next to Markel Bykov's, there was a cow in the yard—of an excellent breed—sheep and pigs, and Serko, his horse, had

become famous throughout the whole district for its swiftness.

Nevertheless, Kirka was troubled and bewildered. He saw the peasants, the whole summer through, breaking their backs in the fields; Nikita Gurianov had spat blood for a fortnight without stopping. . . . And besides, everybody angered and oppressed him. They would do nothing that their grandfathers had not done before them. Kirka had planted sugar-beet on his allotment and somebody (if only he could find out who it was!) had uprooted the plants while they were still quite green, and laid them out on the ground in tidy rows.

"A man ought to have his own land," Ilya Maximovich reflected aloud; he was sitting on a large stone by Kirka's cellar. "If you've got your own land, you can do what you like, and how you like; but as it is now, with things as they are, you only groan and groan."

Kirka brought the sixteenth sack of potatoes from the cellar and flung it on to the heap in the yard. He had decided to send them for sale to the town the following morning; it was a profitable time at which to sell. He was about to descend for the seventeenth sack when Ilya Maximovich's words pinned him to the ground.

"Wouldn't it be going backwards, to have one's own piece of land?"

"Perhaps. . . . If a man's got nothing to hold on to, but you're strong enough now, you're taking the hill at a run."

"Zakhar Kataev is thinking of forming a group to work the Vinnaya field with a tractor. That's more sensible, I think. . . ."

Plakushchev's eyes moved rapidly from side to side under the bushy eyebrows.

"He's still young," he thought, "and if once he breaks loose, there'll be no holding him back. It's dangerous at his age." He turned to Kirka and patted him affectionately on the shoulder. "My friend, why don't you live in peace? The people here respect you, and you're always looking for trouble. Live in peace, and live carefully; remember, water doesn't flow under a still stone." He paused, realising that he was advising Kirka merely to vegetate, and continued hurriedly: "I mean, what I wanted to say was, if you try to break a broom, you can't, but if you pull it to pieces bristle by bristle, it's easy."

"That's an old saying."

Kirka recollected an encounter with an old friend in the town, a few days earlier. He had known Rubtsov at the front, and now he was manager of the town co-operative. "I'm helping to build it up," Rubtsov said, "because that's what we spilt our blood for. And you?" And what was Kirka doing? What could he answer? He had managed to get a wife—Zinka. She had grown fat; her buttocks were like a good saddle. And what else? He had a horse. And what else? A fine house and a garden. "Is that what we fought for? You've got into a bog, Comrade Zhdarkin, you've got into a deep bog."

"That's an old saying," he said again to Ilya Maximovich. "You're looking backwards. You've got used to scratching the earth with your teeth, and that way—you only spoil your teeth."

The unexpected answer startled Plakushchev.

"Don't you talk like that about the people. Don't you say such things. Once you drive the people away from you, it will be the end of us two, of you and of me. You do as I tell you."

The widow Dunya Pchelkina came into the yard.

"Kirill Senafontich," she said, "take pity on my poor orphans' fate. There's nothing for the children to eat. Give me some potatoes; when mine are ready I'll give you back."

Kirka was annoyed.

"What does everybody want of me? I don't ask anybody for anything, and they all come to me, the loafers. They're too lazy to work."

To get rid of the widow, he chose about a dozen half-rotten potatoes, and gave them to her.

"These? Take them, and stuff yourself sick with them." Dunya flung them at his feet. "And they say you're a Communist! Who are you saving them up for? You haven't even got a child. Are you saving them to take with you into your grave? Go on, save, and I'll go to someone poorer than you."

She crossed the street and entered Nikolai Pyriakin's hut.

It seemed to Kirka that something hot and heavy was gnawing at his inside. He tried to shake off the feeling, but it returned, and he felt that a knife was cutting its way through his ribs; he ran into the yard and found Zinka carrying a pail of food for the horse.

"Harness the cart and take all the potatoes to Pchelkina."

"Good heavens, whatever for?"

"Take them, I tell you."

"You can wait. All summer I broke my back over them."

"And I say I won't wait. Take them!"

He led the colt from the stable; it reared playfully. Kirka jerked the horse down and harnessed it to the cart. Zinka grasped the reins, sobbing.

"I won't give them away. I won't give them away, I won't and I won't and I won't!"

"There!" For the first time Kirka struck his wife.

"Kiryusha!" Ilya Maximovich shouted.

2

It took Kirka a long time to placate Zinka. He begged her to forgive him, while Zinka cried and swallowed her tears. When Ilya Maximovich left them, she pulled Kirka into the hayloft. . . .

He came down tired, his clothes crumpled, and stood in the yard for a long time, staring at the heap of potatoes; then he spat on to the ground and called into the house:

"Get someone—Mitka Spirin—to load the potatoes."

"And you?"

"I've got to go to the Soviet."

Ilya Maximovich saw him descend the hill and walk across the allotments to the edge of the village. Resting his head in his hands, Plakushchev pondered:

"What now? I fought hard for Brusski, and now Ognev's got Brusski tight in his fist. It's like shouting at the empty sky to fight him. You can go out into the fields and shout at the sky for a year, it won't do any good."

Nor was that all. Zaovrazhenoye was astir, and some of the peasants from the Krivaya street, too. Ilya Maximovich had decided to hold on, and to fight them. But what could he hold on to? The village community? But in that community Ilya Maximovich was like a pike in the sea.

"If they start, we fall to pieces. Something must be done! But what can I do? I've either got to bury myself like a mole or . . . strike out."

He raised his head and stared at Brusski.

That evening great excitement prevailed in the Krivaya street; the peasants gathered in small groups in their yards.

The old men muttered and shook their heads, but the young peasants—particularly those who had been married the previous autumn—talked unceasingly.

"You're still chickens, just out of the shell," they were told.

"And your heads have got more rubbish inside them than the slop pails."

Ilya Maximovich suggested to Nikita Gurianov that Kirka's plans had to be nipped in the bud.

Bareheaded, Nikita ran from yard to yard, trying to stamp out the beginnings made by Kirka.

"With this four-year rotation of crops, you use less land," he maintained.

They argued with him, drawing diagrams on the ground with their sticks to prove to him that the contrary was the case.

"Then we won't have any pasture ground left. Are you going to tie the cows on to the women's apron-strings?"

"And what are you going to feed the cows on? Pigweed? If not, we've got plenty of dust for them to eat."

"You'll have to dig four ponds in the fields, or else where will you get the water from?"

"We'll dig them."

Well, that way was no good. Nikita tried another method.

"Kirka's not quite right in his head, haven't you noticed? He takes after his grandfather Artamon that way; don't you remember? He started on the water supply, wanted to lead the water from the spring into the street. And now this one, just look what he's thought of! First he started on that swamp, and now he wants the land all cut up again. He's taken leave of his senses."

Yes, the people of Shirokoye remembered. Artamon had persisted in his idea, and he also wanted to dig a mine in the Shikhan hills.

"That's where the people will find their fortune," he had said. "It's buried in the hills. If you dig there, rivers of honey will flow, and the banks will be made of sweet jelly, and all together. . . ."

This method met with better success. It made a great impression on the peasants, and the women caught it up and carried the rumour from house to house. It reached Zinka's ears. She ran to Ognev's hut and found Kirka seated at the table.

"Dear Kirka, leave it alone. Stepan Kharitonovich, little father, don't drag him into it. Don't! Leave him alone."

"What's the matter with you, Zinka? Is there a fire, or what?" Kirka grasped her by the shoulders.

"The people say, they say, they——"

Kirka was excited, as he used to be at the front before an attack.

"So it's begun," he thought, and suddenly his restlessness left him. "I might have expected it. We're taking up the fight."

"Well, what do they say?" Grusha asked.

"About Grandfather Artamon, and they say Kirka's the same."

Unexpectedly Kirka laughed. "That's your father's doings. He's put somebody up to it. You sit down there, and don't take any notice of them."

Tenderly he drew her to his side at the table; it was the first time that he had caressed her in front of other people.

On the table the samovar hissed. Steshka sat between Yashka and Grusha. Stepan did not take his eyes from Kirka's face.

At first the old love for Yashka welled up in Zinka, but she suppressed it quickly and thought: "I've got Kirka. Is he any worse than Yashka? Look how fat Steshka's got."

"Zinaida Ilyinichna, will you have a glass of tea?" Grusha pushed a glass of strong tea towards her.

"Have you got real tea? Zinka exclaimed. "We've only got dried raspberry leaves."

"Now she's started," Kirka thought irritably, "once she begins to talk, I want to sink through the earth."

He glanced angrily at Zinka and then, involuntarily, at Steshka. The faint suggestion of a smile played for a moment over Steshka's full lips. Kirka trembled. Should he look at her again? There she was, just across the table, and he could not reach her . . . too late.

"I ought. . . but what am I thinking of?" He thrust the thought aside, but again glanced from Zinka to Steshka.

"So we'll start," Stepan said. "You'll take one end, Kurmish and Burdiashka, in your group, and I'll take this end. Only we must set to work quietly. The peasants don't like to hurry. You have to take them along gradually. You won't do anything in a year—you might as well get that idea out of your head now. You ought to join the fellowship. But

perhaps you'd better wait about that, and just go on working in the community. You and Zakhar at one end, and us at the other—and so we'll lay the mine."

Late at night Kirka and Zinka went home. Kirka shook Stepan's hand long and warmly.

"Kirya," Zinka interrupted his thoughts. "Sleep in the house to-night; it's too cold in the hayloft."

"All right, I will."

"Where are you going?"

"You go indoors; I just want to run in to Kataev."

With long strides he crossed the street and descended into the Krapivny valley.

3

Quivering and shaking out its many-coloured skirts, crumpled by sleep, dawn hurried over the sky, reflected in the cold dew of the broad-leaved oaks and the thick raspberry bushes.

The sun rose behind the Shikhan hills, gay and rosy, like a three years' child, and smiled to the fields and woods, stretching its long, glowing fingers over the thatched roofs, and tapping soundlessly on the blue windows of the huts. From the ferns and nettles in the Krapivny valley, the mist rose lazily and drifted unwillingly up its sides, until it was tangled and lost among the willows and wild apple trees.

Shirokoye woke up.

Markel Bykov's gate opened and, one after another, nine pigs ambled out, grunting and wagging their long, dirty ears.

"Pashka!" Markel cried, running to the door. "Look after the pigs, you son of a bitch. They're running away."

On all fours, Pavel was crawling over the yard, drawing with a stick the outline of a huge horse's hoof. At Markel's call he stood up laughing, and pointing to the hoof.

"Look at that. What a horse! If I could harness such a horse to a cart as big as this street, I'd carry all the sheaves from the field in one journey."

"Oh, you idiot. Well, what are you making cod's eyes at me for? Look, the pigs are running away. Run after them."

Pavel poked out a large red tongue at his father.

"You ugly dummy! I'll give you——" Markel came a step nearer.

Pavel ran after the pigs; Markel came down into the yard

slowly, as if trying the strength of the steps. He glanced over the fence into the street.

"For what sin did the Lord God send you to me, you ugly monster?" he muttered. "Other people have children, but you're a monstrosity, a real monstrosity. Now he's stopped again. Pashka! I'll come out in a minute, you wait till I get you," he shook a large, hairy fist at his son, and went into the shed. Sitting down on the bench, he bent his head, and his hair, cut in a circular fashion, hung to one side; it looked as if a thin sheaf of rye was hanging from his head.

The morning sun was hot. The hum of human voices, the lowing of cows and calves, spread peacefully over Shirokoye. From the distance came the soft, even call of a bell.

"I expect that's from Nikolskoye," Markel thought. "Nine *versts* away, and you can hear it. We ought to have a bell like that; ours only buzzes."

He sat listening to the bell a long time. Now and again Ulka came out of the house to fetch firewood or water. Markel watched her.

"What a fine woman she is," he thought. "Young and fresh, all milk and honey. With a wife like that, I'd work till my last gasp, and work well and cheerfully, too. But him, not a bit. . . . What's that hoof he's drawn there? Ugh!"

When the bell was silent, he began to think of himself. This had occurred very frequently of late; whenever he sat by himself, thoughts buzzed through his head like importunate mosquitoes. Markel drove them away, but they returned, humming and droning. And now, as soon as he sat down, he thought of his own life, of earlier days.

Markel knew that, where Zaovrazhenoye now stood, there had once been an impenetrable pine forest. Even on very still days, the rustling of the trees could be heard for miles around, and when it was stormy, the forest roared. The young, slender pines fell with a deafening crash, their tops resting against the other trees; there they withered into eternal greyness; the needles dropped down, and the trunks crumbled away. Below the forest, the ground was a marsh, and here and there gleamed deep, still pools. At the bottom of the ravine, the river Alai played between its high, narrow banks. There were wild beasts in the forest, and at night the owls cried mournfully for the past.

To this forest, from their earlier home by the upper Volga, came the Bykovs, Old Believers. Near the White Lake,

enclosed by tall, sturdy pine trees, they dug holes for themselves, like dormice, built little earthen huts, and spent the days and nights in prayer and highway robbery.

The road from Moscow to the Volga ran by the Alai and the White Lake. Merchants journeyed between Moscow and the Volga. Armed with pitchforks and axes, the Bykovs went out to meet them, and deprived them of all their belongings. They threw the merchants and the gentry into the pools, so that no trace of them remained.

So they lived for a long time; they grew and multiplied. The young men stole wives from far-off villages, the girls found husbands, and soon different names sprang up in the pine forest—Sergutov, Nosskov, Gurianov, Plakushchev; the land around the White Lake became insufficient and the younger people moved to the other side of the Alai. So they lived, and the young men grew beards, and the old men drooped towards the earth and withdrew into the forest. There they devoted themselves to God and, when they died, advised their descendants:

"Don't lose your liberty; live by the Gospels. Don't forget yourselves, and when you are old pray that your sins may be forgiven you."

Then quite suddenly the regiments of the Tsar appeared. They caught the leaders and hanged them from the pine trees; the hardiest and the boldest they tied to the tails of horses, and sent the horses off to the forest; through the forest were scattered the bones of those who would not surrender, even under torture, who would not deny their belief. Then the Tsaritsa Ekaterina gave the land to the Countess Karpochikha, who did not interfere with the Bykov's religion. She gathered together all the people on her land, and they cut down the pine trees.

The century-old pines fell under the blows of the axes and the saws, their tips touching the damp earth, groaning like stricken giants. The White Lake was bared to the sky. Bared, too, were the caves and cells of the Bykovs; the sun lit up that age-long darkness; the marshes steamed and the sun consumed the dampness of the earth; the pools seemed to smile joyfully.

But it was only the children and the foolish ones who rejoiced in the sun. The elder Bykovs retreated into the forest, to the sombre, silent pools. The people, spurred on by the Countess, cut down the trees, uprooting and burning

the stumps. From early morning until late night, the forest was troubled by human groans. The smoke of the burning pine trees floated through the forest, enveloping the caves and huts of the Bykovs. The Bykovs sent out scouts; they all returned with bad news. Now there was no leader like Saffron Bykov, who had guided his family across the marshes and the steppes, along paths made by wild animals, from the upper Volga to the White Lake. They had lost their leader and lost their courage, and at last the Bykovs bent their necks to the Countess; they sent log rafts down the river, driving them along the Alai to the Volga and down the Volga to the sea; with the rafts went their freedom.

That was how it had happened; but when she grew old, the Countess Karpochikha exchanged the Bykovs for a fine horse owned by Prince Ermolov, an ancester of Sutiagin. Ermolov treated them quite differently: he drove all the Bykovs from the White Lake and settled them on what was now the Krivaya street; he had them all baptised in the river Alai and forced them to build a little church.

From that time only a shadowy memory of freedom remained.

Markel Bykov himself was a member of the Orthodox Church; but his ideas and habits were those of his grandfathers. When he was young he carried on an easy business. He formed a group of Mordvinians and Tatars; they burnt the shafts of their sledges and Markel would dash off to prosperous villages, to collect gifts for the victims of the fire. Within a month or two he returned to Shirokoye, his pocket stuffed with money. It seemed that the villagers had forgotten all about it; but perhaps they had not forgotten, perhaps they were only biding their time, withholding the blow for a more favourable opportunity; then they would turn on him.

"You're a beggar, you are. Nothing but a beggar."

The peasants of Shirokoye were wholly unaware that Markel had been the friend of the old Tatar horse thief, and Markel himself tried hard to forget it.

That was a sin, but now it was no more. Why should he bear it in mind? The people might come to hear of it, and then, when he was an old man, they would wring his neck. To wipe out that sin Markel had burnt innumerable candles before the image of St. George the Dragon Slayer. Surely God had long ago forgiven him; he was quite clean before

God. If only the people did not find out, did not learn of his sin—with God he had made his peace long ago. He attended church regularly and became churchwarden; of swallows he would say:

"The swallow is a heavenly bird; it carries prayers to the Almighty."

More than once he would box children's ears for demolishing the swallows' nests, snarling in his nasal voice:

"You can break the chirpers' nests—(he called sparrows chirpers)—because they carried nails to the Jews to knock into Christ's body; but the swallows are God's birds."

And Markel prospered. The villagers respected him. He knew that they respected him because he managed his household well, because his barn was well stored with grain, because he was churchwarden and perhaps, too, because he held himself erect and with his own money paid for a rail to be built round the church, and himself painted it green. Markel was content; one thing alone troubled him, and that was like a millstone round his neck; his sons did not take after him. The elder boy, Mikhail, had joined up in the Red Army a long time ago. Now he was a Red Commandant and lived in Moscow. Secretly Markel was proud of his son, but his mind ran on other lines:

"Now Mishka's no good at all for the house. He lives and yet he doesn't."

The second son, Pavel, was tall and strong like his father, but he was weak in the head. Two years previously Markel had married him to one of the village girls. Although Ulka was the daughter of a widow, she was hard-working and sang well; she was round and sweet like a sugar-loaf.

"Perhaps when he's slept with a woman like that," Markel thought, "he'll come to his senses."

But nothing happened. It was as if Markel had spat into the dust in an effort to wash it away. Just as before his marriage, Pavel continued to howl his songs, to chase the dogs through the village, to pull the ropes in the belfry—this was his particular passion—and to threaten his mother:

"I'll strangle you, you bitch!"

"What can I do with him, the idiot?" Markel wondered. "When we get old, he'll wring our necks, the swine."

A dog yelped in the street.

Markel stood up.

"Pashka!" he screamed across the fence. "Pashka, you

cur! Didn't I tell you to leave the dogs alone? Bring back the pigs. Wait till I get you. I'll give it to you!" He ran to the gate.

4

Kirka Zhdarkin had just awakened. The noise made by Zinka with her pots and pans had aroused him, and the squealing of the lame piglet under the bed.

Unwillingly he got up and put on his old Red Army trousers, a white shirt, and boots. Taking his shabby canvas portfolio under his arm, he called out:

"I'm going to the Soviet."

"Won't you eat first?" Zinka called back.

Kirka went out smiling. He put on his cap and walked to the fence.

"Good health to you, Markel Petrovich," he said. "Hi! Can't you hear? I said 'Good health to you!' "

"What?" Markel turned away from the gate. "Oh! Is that you? Good morning!"

"What are you cursing about so early?"

"Oh, that's just my way, Kirill Senafontich. I'm just making the round of the house. When a cow gets up, she moos, and when we get up, we shout."

"You mean you imitate the cows?"

"Well, none of us live very far off from cows. And what are you doing all dressed up in your uniform?"

"Me?"

"Yes." Markel looked at him across the fence. "Not me, I'm sure."

"We've got a holiday to-day."

"How's that? What holiday?"

Kirka thought for a moment, and answered at random: "It's Constitution Day to-day. Didn't you know? It's like the old Tsar days we used to have."[1]

"Of course I know," Markel smiled. "Oh yes, I know. If things went according to the constitution, we'd be living much better than we are. Lenin was a clever peasant, he gave us a fine constitution, but we don't know how——" he hesitated.

"Oh yes, I know, I know." Kirka drummed his fingers on the wooden post of the fence. "By the way, what news do

[1] Tsar days was the name given to the numerous holidays appointed to celebrate the birthdays of the members of the Imperial family.

you get from Moscow? They say your son lives in a big stone house, and rides about in a motor-car."

Markel came nearer.

"You can't be compared to him," he thought; and drawled, "Well, I don't think it's the right place for him. He ought to live with his father. It's not bad how we live here, but he must go off to his stone house."

"Well, that's not so bad either. A stone house won't burn down."

Markel spread out the fingers of his two hands until they looked like small pitchforks.

"It's stone all right, but it isn't his own. It's good to have your own house, even if it is a small one. And what's he got? Nothing! He's a pauper."

"But some people have to go into the service."

"That's true, but he's done his share now, and he ought to leave it. That's what the others do, and some don't serve at all. Look at the Tatars, they don't serve at all. They make themselves blind, and cripples, so long as they needn't serve; and they don't."

"Is that also according to the constitution?" Kirka asked gently.

Markel looked up. Kirka was leaning against the fence, laughing silently.

"According to your constitution, eh?"

They looked at each other for a few moments in silence. Markel's eyes glittered angrily.

"You're laughing again," he thought. "You damned weathercock."

He shivered as if in a cold wind, put his hands in his pockets and shrugged his shoulders.

The door squeaked and opened; Ulka ran down the steps. She was wearing a blue dress, and carried a bucket in her hand; her bare shoulders gleamed in the sunlight. With a vigorous swing of her arms, she splashed the dirty water down by the fence, her stomach thrown forward, and looked at Kirka.

The fence quivered under Kirka's grip, and the smile left his face.

"What's up with me?" he thought, and glanced at the chimney. "Yes, according to the constitution, eh?"

"Where are you slopping that water about? Can't you find another place?"

"I always empty it here. What are you getting so excited about?"

"I don't care if you do always empty it here, your tongue's too sharp."

"It always was."

"Always, always."

"Yes, always. Just look at him." Ulka laughed loudly; her voice was clear and high. Kirka was infected by her merriment, and laughed too.

Markel rubbed his hands against his trousers and turned away, listening. From the river, carried by the wind, came the sound of human voices, and the grunting of pigs.

"What's the matter there? Those pigs again."

He ran down to the bath-huts and on to the ravine, raising the dust with his torn felt boots.

Expertly, Ulka jumped on to one of the fence posts, stretching her white neck.

"Just like a young girl," Kirka thought and, with an agile leap, placed himself at her side.

5

The ground in the ravine, by the bath-huts, was boggy. Stunted willows grew there and at evening the reeds swayed and whispered softly. In the springtime, when the snows melted, the willows and reeds were covered thickly with slime, and in summer, when the slime had hardened, cracks appeared on the surface, like wrinkles on an old, old man's face, and the marsh stank. Clouds of mosquitoes and gnats swarmed over the place. But for the pigs it was paradise; they ate the roots and the prickly grass, and in the hot weather they took their porcine baths, rolling on their backs in the mud and grunting delightedly.

Two years previously Mitka Spirin had taken it into his head to start an allotment on the marsh. The first summer he spent digging up the willow roots and the second summer he carried manure and soil to the allotment. This spring he had dug small holes and planted cucumbers. The cucumbers came up, the thin tendrils intertwined, adorned with pale yellow flowers. And now Markel Bykov's pigs had broken through the fence which separated the allotment from the bath-huts, and torn up all the young cucumbers.

"Get out!" Mitka howled, and ran to the allotment, flourishing a big stick. Ulka and Kirka watched him running across the allotment, laying about him right and left with the stick, and shouting to Pavel.

"Stop them, Panya, stop them. We'll give them a lesson. The evil spirit has got into those pigs. Stop them, don't let them get to that hole. Stop them!"

Kneeling behind the fence close to the hole, his large white teeth exposed by a constant, foolish grin, Pavel beat the pigs. As soon as a pig came near the hole, Pavel beat it with a large stick, exerting all his strength; the animal flew back, like a cork from a bottle. Finding no way out of the trap, the pigs staggered over the allotment, squealing under the blows which rained down from Mitka's stick.

Markel stood on the hill, his arms raised to the heavens, and shouted:

"Pashka, you idiot! Pashka!"

Over the Alai, the voices of women quarrelling on the allotments on the opposite bank mingled in one confused sound with the squealing of the pigs and the shouts of Mitka, Pavel and Markel.

"What a simpleton he is." Ulka laughed quietly. "He's beating his own pigs. Well, isn't he a fool, eh?" She turned to Kirka. "Just think!"

Kirka looked at her, and saw that at any moment the tears would start from her eyes; it seemed to him that Ulka had for a long time been complaining of some constant grief, and had found no answer. His stony face softened. Ulka pulled her dress straight and jumped down; she leaned against the fence, and Kirka felt her breasts against his feet.

"Why do I have to stand all this torture? Tell me."

Then she drew back suddenly, shook herself like a dog coming out of water, and walked hastily to the door, murmuring:

"What am I chattering about? I don't know myself."

"Ulka," Kirka whispered. "Ulka!"

"What is it?" She turned back. "Why do you stop me?"

Kirka forgot what he had wanted to say.

Ulka bit her lower lip angrily.

"Well, what? What?" She waved her hand. "You're all the same. You've all got the one thing in your head."

Slowly she ascended the steps, her tanned calves gleaming dully in the sun.

"No, Ulka. Come back!" Kirka called loudly, and sat down on the fence.

She stopped and turned her head. In her eyes two sparks of laughter flared up like bonfires. Kirka's forehead was covered with sweat; he wiped it away with his sleeve.

"Isn't it hot!"

"It's very hot, Kirill Senafontich; it's really terrible." Ulka smiled, and came nearer to the fence, her large blue eyes wide and questioning. "Well, what did you call me back for?"

"Shall I jump down? What am I waiting for? Eh! Women's strength, and a man can't call his tongue his own." He stretched his hands out towards her: "You," he said.

Ulka leaned back and grew pale.

"You, Kirill Senafontich," she whispered, as if afraid of disturbing a sleeping child; "don't touch me, don't joke, don't make a joke. . . ."

"I. . . I only wanted to ask you. . . . How are you getting on—in your married life?"

"Does that interest you?" The blood returned to her lips, and her cheeks flushed deeply under the sunburn. "Well, quite well. We've got everything: cows, horses, bread. When I lived with my mother we ate dry crusts." She leaned forward and stretched out her arms. "We could hardly keep body and soul——"

She did not finish the sentence. A piercing shriek came from the doorway of Kirka's house.

"Oh, so that's how you're spending the time! Went to the Soviet, didn't you? Didn't want to work! Went to the Soviet, didn't you?"

Kirka immediately guessed the origin of the shriek. Zinka stood in the doorway, her face pale and twitching, repeating hysterically:

"You went to the Soviet, didn't you? Didn't want to work."

"What on earth do you think I want your Kirka for?" Ulka cried. She turned and went indoors, forgetting to take the bucket with her.

6

When Mitka noticed Markel, he ran among the willow trees, threw away his stick and shouted to Pavel as he came out again into the open:

"Pashka, what are you doing? You'll kill the pigs! The animals don't know what they're doing, do they? Markel Petrovich, look what your son's doing. You'll kill them, Pashka. Get away from the hole, get away."

He sprang over the fence and snatched the stick from Pavel's hand. Pavel stood still, laughing foolishly, and snatched the stick back again; he swung it over his head.

"What are you doing, Pashka? What are you doing?" Mitka screamed, and ran across the bog, jumping from hillock to hillock.

The pigs tumbled through the hole, one after the other, like a train; the old boar-pig led the way, acting as the locomotive; behind him came the carriages, and the wavering line puffed and squealed along its way towards the allotments in the Krapivny valley. Some peasant women were working on the allotments, accompanied by the old folk and the children. Seeing the pigs descending upon them, they attacked them with their spades and hoes. Squealing and grunting, the animals answered the attack, smothering themselves in the women's skirts, knocking the children off their feet, crushing the young green pumpkins. Grandfather Maxim Fedunov dealt the boar-pig a heavy blow on the snout with his stick; the animal grunted and fell among some potatoes, its legs twitched, uprooting the young plants.

Deprived of their leader, and driven into wild confusion by the cries and blows of the peasants, the pigs made their way back to Shirokoye. Markel Bykov scrambled along the ditch on the farther side of the river.

"Markel Petrovich," Maxim called out, "some devil's killed your boar-pig. Look here. . . . How could any man raise his hand against a silly animal?" Grandfather Maxim turned and walked hurriedly into his hut.

The old men, the women and children, surrounded the dying animal, which writhed in pain. Pale and breathing heavily, Markel bent over the pig.

"Has anyone got a knife?" he asked, in a choking voice.

"Perhaps it'll get better," somebody said softly. "It's not so easy to kill a pig, they're strong animals. . . ."

"No, I want a knife."

Aunt Grunya Gurianova slipped out of the crowd and ran to the hut to get a knife.

7

Nikolai Pyriakin's voice rang through the fresh morning air.

"Hi, friends! What are you so long about? The fire's blazing."

The fishermen's boats stood out darkly against the chalky whiteness of the bank; they had caught some fat sturgeon.

"We're bringing them," Stepan answered; in his hand he held a fresh, quivering sturgeon. "We're coming now, Kolya."

Two black smudges, Stepan Ognev and Davidka Panov, scrambled up the blinding, white, sun-flooded bank.

Near the birch copse on Brusski, the members of the fellowship cooked fish soup. Water bubbled in the small bucket suspended over the fire; the sturgeon wriggled in the hot water, and globules of fat rose to the surface. Some way off the tractor was being driven over the land.

"Nikolai," Ognev said laughingly. "Do go on your cow after the tractor again."

"No, I've done it enough already."

"Do try again, perhaps you'll catch it up this time." Davidka winked. "Go on!"

"I've done it enough." Nikolai sat down by the fire and piled on more fuel. The dry wood crackled, and a thin green branch from a birch tree hissed and twisted into a screw. Nikolai pushed the damp branch into the heart of the fire.

"See," he said, smiling, "it's not in its right place. Listen how it whines; but the dry firewood is in its right place, and it's quite happy."

"What do you mean by that?" Stepan was surprised.

"Yes, what?" Davidka added. "What are you trying to say?"

Nikolai poked the fire with a stick.

"I mean this: it's the same with a man. If he's not in the right place, he does his work badly, and gets blisters on his hands; but if he's in the right place he's happy at his work."

"Oh, get away with you," Stepan laughed. "Look at the ideas he's getting in his head now. But he's right just the same."

"And besides,"—Nikolai grimaced and brushed off a spark that had lighted on his beard—"and besides, when we first began to work on Brusski here, we were like that birch branch, only instead of whining, we roared. And now,"—

he reflected for a moment, and then pointed towards the tent where the old plough lay, its iron teeth rusted—"and now we're just like that plough."

"How's that?"

"Well, we're not doing anything either. Don't get angry, Stepan. Now the tractor's come, and we don't plough the fields any more, Grigory and someone else do all the work for everybody, and that's how the threshing's done also."

"What's all this nonsense about?" Stepan frowned.

" I'm afraid we're all going to grow lazy."

"Oh!" Stepan burst out laughing, and his laughter infected Davidka. "So that's the trouble! You're afraid we're all getting lazy. Do you hear that? He's afraid we won't get any more corns on our hands, and we'll get so fat that we won't be able to move."

"No, look here, you stop howling." Nikolai shook his head and hands. "You're too clever, you are, David. . . ."

"No, Kolya!" Stepan stopped laughing. "No, you haven't thought enough about it. Do we need a rest? We do. We've sweated enough on Brusski; it mounts up in the years. And now we're resting, and getting our strength back again. Then we'll start work again; we've got more than enough work to do, brother. First we've got to break down the old village community, and we've got to fill up all the holes. . . ."

"No. I won't mix in that. You leave me out of that."

"We'll manage without you. You carry on with Brusski. And then, isn't your house all falling to bits? Of course it is, and so's mine, and so's Grigory's. Even if we've got enough bread to eat, there'll still be enough for us to do. Those barracks,"—he pointed across the ravine to the landlord's old house—"we've got to put that right. It's a stone house, and it would do fine for a club or a communal kitchen and dining-room. Until we've all got enough to live well on, until we've all got a place of our own and a place all together, there'll be enough work for us to do. And you wait; by autumn they'll all be rushing into the fellowship; the old fences will break down."

"Yes," Davidka put in. "Even now a few of them are talking about coming in."

The soup boiled over.

"Grisha," Nikolai cried, taking the bucket from the fire. "Come along, the soup's ready."

The tractor advanced over the weeds and stones, swerved sharply and stopped near the fire.

"Now you can have a rest, old chap." Grigory Skulov addressed the tractor and sat down by the fire. "I'm quite used to it now."

"Call Shtirkin, Kolya."

Nikolai rose to his knees, put his hand to his mouth and bellowed:

"Sht-ir-kin! Break-fast! Soup's ready!"

Shtirkin came out of the birch copse; he was carrying an axe in his hand. Scratching his bearded chin, he sat down by the fire.

"There's enough work in there. It all went to rot under the landlord."

They ate their soup, with white bread, and spoke of their work. It would soon be necessary to attach the threshing-machine to the tractor, and go over to the Shirokoye threshing-ground—the peasants could have their corn threshed if they so desired. They went on to speak of their wives; nowadays they were not so irritable and quarrelsome; and Nikolai's Katya had grown younger, it seemed, her shoulder-bones no longer stuck out, and there was always a smile on her face. Grusha Ogneva looked much fresher.

"She looks quite juicy now," Stepan said.

So they spoke, and hinted to Nikolai that if Katya really did have a baby, they would have to give it an October christening.

And in the fields the peasants of Shirokoye worked their land with ploughs and harrows; the sweat dropped from their horses, and the dust settled thickly on their wet bodies; the peasants walked behind the horses, their faces turned to the sky, the hot blue sky.

"We want rain."

"Look, everything's drying up without the rain," Chizhik muttered. "You hardly come to the end of a furrow, and already it's all dried up."

At the edge of the wood Petka Kudeyarov trailed wearily behind his grey mare; now and again his whip whistled through the air. He looked at Chizhik.

"Uncle Savel," he called out, "have you got a cigarette?"

"What? Something to smoke?"

Chizhik stopped, and slipped his hand into his pocket; the pouch was full of tobacco.

"Haven't got any," he cried. "It's all gone, damn it." To himself he muttered: "There's nothing for you here. Always give—give—give."

The members of the fellowship looked across at them and laughed.

"Look at them! They'll get there in the end."

"They'll go on till they get to us," Stepan said. "We must get Yakov in."

"He is coming in," Nikolai said, waving his spoon. "I saw him a little while ago and he says to me: 'It's quite settled, I'm coming in with you.'"

8

The Chukhliav house was divided into two: a thin partition had been made, but although it was thin, it could not be crossed, nor could it be broken through.

Behind the partition lived Yashka and Steshka.

And the partition existed in Yegor Stepanovich's head.

"The father of the family, and the son of the family—in one house, and yet divided. How can you live like that?"

"To live side by side, and yet never say a word to one another."

Yegor Stepanovich tugged at his shirt and stared out of the window.

"What sort of a life is this?" he thought. "A father works for his children all his life long, but the children—oh no!"

Some chickens were fluttering about in the yard—strange chickens; Pyriakin's chickens had mingled with his own, and were pecking away at the seed.

"They don't care at all, although they're not our chickens."

Growling to himself, he went into the other room and looked out of the window; everything brought the same thought to his mind. A half-finished wagon leaned against the fence; Yegor Stepanovich had thought of buying a third horse, and he had engaged a Mordvinian labourer to build the wagon; but the man had to be dismissed. How could he keep the Mordvinian, when the house was divided in two?

"Husband!" Klunya cried. "Breakfast is ready. There's pancakes this morning—you like them."

"Where's Yashka?"

"At his father-in-law's. He went away very early."

"They go there often."

He was silent again.

"How cold I am," he thought. "As soon as it gets the least bit cold, I freeze. What I was waiting for hasn't happened; and now this has happened. Why has everything . . . everything turned upside down? Upside down. Why?"

Yegor Stepanovich would have liked to live in peace; he would have liked his life to run on smoothly, without any friction. But everything broke in his hands, and if he mended it in one place, it broke in another.

From some grey distance moved forward the figure of the young, courageous Yegor Stepanovich.

"Just like Yashka," he murmured almost inaudibly. "The same make, one and the same make. What we could have done together! He's got strength, and he's got a tongue also. Just look how he got the better of Ilya Maximovich the other day, and in front of all the people, too. If I could only turn everything back to front; if I could throw off the years and start life again, knowing where all the holes and pitfalls are, where you have to go round, and where you have to go straight on without being afraid. It would be good to start again, but you can't. Years aren't like the beads on the counting-frame; you can't move them backwards and forwards, add them up and take them away just as you like. But the years . . ." Yegor Stepanovich sighed. "I might go to the monastery, only they say they've pulled it down."

He laughed angrily, remembering how late the previous night the door behind the partition had squeaked, and somebody had entered Yashka's room. Yegor Stepanovich was walking up and down, thinking, and at times, forgetting himself, he exclaimed loudly.

"Be quiet. You'll wake up the baby!" Steshka called out.

"Listen to them, wake the baby! We used to sleep when all the bells were ringing, and nobody even heard them. And here you can't even whisper. . . . Your Highness."

9

On the bank of the Volga, full in the sunlight, stood Yashka; his shirt was open. He carried Annushka in his arms; Annushka waved her hands, babbled and pulled at Yashka's ears.

"Don't fidget, girlie, don't fidget. Look, there's mother."

Steshka lay flat on the water, beating up fountains of spray

with her feet; the water foamed and the foam, carried downstream, melted away like snow in the thaw. Her back gleamed white against the dark river, and her long plait traced a black line along the spine; when she moved off from the bank with a powerful overarm stroke, the thick black line swayed from side to side.

"Hi! Yasha!" she shouted. "Yasha! The water's so warm. Put Annushka down and come swimming."

He laid Annushka down on the bank, next to Steshka's clothes, gathered together some small stones, blue, white and red, washed smooth by the river, and placed them in front of the child.

"Here you are; play with them, little girlie."

Annushka picked up a stone and put it in her mouth.

"Oh no, you mustn't do that; you mustn't eat them. They're not biscuits."

From the Volga, Steshka's voice rang out loudly:

"Yasha!"

"Coming! Here you are, play with them for a little while."

He rattled the stones. Annushka laughed gleefully and fell on one side; the sun burned down, making her sleepy; her eyes closed. Yashka pulled off his shirt and trousers and ran to the edge of the water. Without pausing he dived straight into the river, and a fountain of spray burst upwards, glittering in the sun for a few moments. Yashka came out some yards out and reached Steshka in a few vigorous strokes.

"Come on, Steshka! Come on, follow me!"

They swam straight across the Volga, leaving behind them a trail of curling foam. In a few minutes their white bodies disappeared and only two dark heads swayed on the broad, grey-blue back of the Volga.

"Don't fall behind!" Yashka's voice crossed the intervening water, low but distinct. "Don't fall behind!"

They swam out farther, until their heads appeared like two black dots bobbing up and down on the calm surface of the river, carried along by the current. Then they turned; Yashka swam on his back, Steshka used a sidestroke. Their heads almost touching, they moved forwards towards the bank, sunny and deserted.

Suddenly, at about ten or twelve yards from the bank, where the current was strong, Yashka half rose from the water, shouted "Ho!" and disappeared from her sight.

Steshka went on, laughing and looking back. Where Yashka had gone down bubbles appeared on the surface of the water and broke into tiny circles of foam.

"Where will he come up? Over there? Shall I swim there? I'll get hold of him by his hair. But perhaps he's here just under me."

She ducked her head under water, hoping to see Yashka, and then swam towards the bank. About five or six yards away from it she was suddenly overcome by anxiety.

"Why is he so long?"

She stopped swimming and moved her hands slowly through the water, looking again at the spot where Yashka had disappeared. Her heart beat rapidly; turning towards the bank she shouted:

"Yashka!" And then louder, more piercingly: "Yashka, for God's sake."

Her hands would no longer move, as if someone were gripping them tightly under the water. The bank was near, quite near, and there was Annushka, lying peacefully on her side in the sun.

Exerting her last strength, Steshka swam closer to the bank and then tried to stand up; the water reached her lips and lapped into her mouth, open in terror. She threw back her head; the current swept her off her feet.

Steshka screamed and, almost unconsciously, began to swim again. The few strokes seemed to take a year, a whole eternity.

"Yasha! Help!" And then, in utter desperation, "Yasha! Oh, my God!"

"What is it?" Yashka dived up in front of her. "What is it?" His face broadened in a smile.

She threw her arms round his neck.

"Oh, I was so frightened. I thought——"

The current carried his body close to hers; in the water it was cool and slippery like silk; the contact of his body with hers awakened an as yet inexperienced sensation in Steshka. Her lips moved soundlessly and her eyes were intoxicated with a new happiness. The muscles of Yashka's arms rippled like a slack rope; she lay in his arms in the water, which lapped gently against her breast. Her lips parted; she whispered to him, softly and eagerly. Silently Yashka crushed back the whisper with his lips, and raised her out

of the water; her wet sunburned body gleamed in the sunlight.

Annushka woke up.

10

"Ah! Here's the couple of them, the goose and the gander," Davidka greeted them from his seat by the fire. "Hurry up, or there'll be no soup left."

"You've forgotten the duckling; they're not a pair, they're a *troika.*" Stepan held out his arms to Annushka. "And look what a duckling it is."

The men moved to make room for Steshka and Yashka.

"We were just talking about you," Nikolai said. "We've been pulling you to bits."

Annushka picked up a big spoon.

"Just look at her," Stepan frowned. "Look here, young lady, you're eating and you haven't worked for it."

Annushka turned to him and buried her fingers in his thick beard.

Davidka put his spoon in the bowl and turned to Yashka.

"You know, Yakov, you still owe us a wedding. You've taken the best maid in the village, and did it all on the quiet."

"Let's wait till after the harvest," Stepan said.

"Then we'll have a wedding feast for the fellowship and for the whole village, Uncle David. Now I'm on my own feet, you see, and anyhow . . . me and Steshka have finally decided to join the fellowship. Will you accept us?"

"We'll have to think it over; we must consider it." Davidka pressed his lips together tightly.

"Yes, we must think it over," Stepan agreed.

"Don't take any notice of them," Nikolai said. "We were only just saying how good it would be to have you in."

"Well, now he's let the secret out," Stepan laughed. "Oh, you, Kolya. There'll be a wedding all right. . . . But how hot it is! I expect our crops will hold out, we planted deep in new soil. But I think the peasants' crop will be burned to death."

THE NINTH LINK

I

Several times Nikita Gurianov made the round of the fields, examining the crops; each time his back grew more bent, his body thinner. This day he could scarcely drag his feet along; he stopped in the yard, staring gloomily at the fields. Clouds of dust whirled over them, as if playing at hide-and-seek.

"Look at it!" Nikita barely moved his lips, which were dry and colourless like withered pumpkins. "You can't do anything with it. Eh!" He sighed deeply and there was a crackling sound in his chest, as of thin ice crunched underfoot. "We'll have to go back to black bread again."

"Black bread would be all right," Mitka Spirin muttered, coming up from the river with a load of bark. "But if we have to live on wormwood and horse-sorrel, we'll peg out, blast it." He laughed in shrill, bird-like tones. "And Ognev was saying that in the papers it says we're sure to have heavy rain on St. Mary's day, or even before."

"St. Mary's day—we'll be burnt out before then."

"Perhaps it will rain before then."

"Oh no, it's been like this since spring. The earth's as hard as iron. You can't expect anything good now. Look how hot it is, everything's burnt to dust."

Two beards were pointed to the hot sky; Mitka Spirin's thin and slightly grey; Gurianov's reddish, square-cut, threaded with white.

"Do you know what, Nikita Semyonich," Mitka's voice disturbed the sultry stillness. "I think our land has been bewitched. As soon as a cloud comes, it breaks into two, and goes off in different directions, like as if someone had swept it away."

"Perhaps that may be. But I think it's all the hills' fault. They're to blame for everything. You look here, three days ago there was a real downpour in Nikolskoye, and here everything's dried up, and it's not even ten *versts* away. Why

is that? It's the hills. You just notice, when the clouds come this way, they knock up against Balbashikha or Shikhan, and off they go in another direction. We ought to knock them down," Nikita added, after a short pause. "All of us in the village ought to go there and break them down, or at least we ought to cut a road through them. We ought to get Kirka on to the job—but what's he doing? Just mucking about in the village."

Mitka looked at the hills; they were wooded and surrounded the fields of Shirokoye like a horseshoe. He fancied that the paths had already been cut through them, and the clouds had gathered over them like the thick smoke which came out of the bath-house chimney; the rain poured down in bucketfuls and the fields grew green; the earth squelched agreeably and the peasants were happy.

"Yes," he said, "only our chairman's thinking of other things. He's too busy with his wife. Did you hear that the other day he gave her a good thrashing and took himself off to Ulka, Pashka's wife? That's what takes up his time."

He was silent. Nearby a child wailed monotonously; by the lake below children shouted at their play, and the blacksmith Vassili beat his hammer on the anvil.

"They say there's a drought in Nikolskoye also." Mitka scratched his hand. "And at Ermolovka it was just pouring."

"We ought to cut them down," Nikita murmured softly, listening to the noise that came from the street.

In the street, near the well, stood Grandfather Pakhom Pchelkin's hut. It was very old, like Pakhom himself. Several peasants had gathered outside, and Pakhom turned from one to the other, groaning.

"I've lived here seventy-three years, and now I must leave it and go to live among strangers. I've got to leave it and go away."

He looked at the peasants, and his eyes rested on Markel Bykov; he stretched out his right hand.

"All right, take it, Markel Petrovich. But don't be stingy. You're getting a fine piece of goods. Well, how much will you give me, Markel Petrovich?"

Markel smiled, clasped his hands behind his back and looked down the street to his own fine house; then he turned back and glanced contemptuously at Pakhom's small decrepit hut.

"What use is it to me? If you just kicked it you wouldn't be able to collect all the dust that would fall down."

"Well, you might at least help an old man who's in trouble," Mitka said.

"So I've got to die?" Pakhom beat his breast with a small, weak fist. "A man doesn't want to die, and you know yourself that many men would have died in the black years if they hadn't gone to another place where there was bread to eat; that's how it is now, or else do you think I'd want to sell my house?"

"You won't die," Mitka put in, turning to Markel. "You ought to help him. It will do for Pavel, or for Mikhail when he comes back. You ought to help him, you've got enough."

"You've got a kind heart, haven't you?" Markel replied. "Why don't you help him yourself, you've got enough, too? Sell your other cow—what do you want her for anyway—and buy the place yourself."

"Oh, me!" Mitka laughed. "I said it just like this. . . . Well, you know—everybody knows I can't buy it. . . ."

"That's it! But you're quick enough at advising other people to buy, aren't you? Only not yourself. Well,"—he turned to Pakhom—"just to help you, three pud."

The peasants moved uneasily and fixed their eyes to the ground, as if they had been dragged into the market-place without their trousers on. Pakhom trembled and pulled Markel by the sleeve. He kicked the corner of the hut; splinters of wood, rotted by damp, fell down at the blow, and under the bench the mice squeaked in fear.

"Look! Look at the corners! What wood! You won't find such pinewood to-day growing anywhere in Russia."

"Three pud," Markel repeated. "And that's only because——"

"Three pud? I won't give it for three! I'd rather set fire to it. I'd rather set fire to it with my own hands than give it away for three pud."

Ulka ran out from the yard. Shading her eyes with one hand, and with the other holding her kerchief against her breast, she shouted:

"Hi, you! Come and eat!"

"Well, set it on fire," Markel said, and went away in answer to Ulka's call.

"Where are you thinking of going?" Mitka asked, sitting down on the bench.

"To Kizliar. A nephew of mine from Ermolovka asked me to come to Kizliar. There, he says, they've got everything. Grapes and wine, and you don't even have to plant the potatoes, they grow by themselves."

The peasants sat down in a circle and smoked, shielding their cigarettes between cupped hands. Everything was so dry that the least spark might start a fire. They listened to Grandfather Pakhom's stories of Kizliar.

"In China, they say, in China they eat fried locusts. And they do say it tastes very nice. But China's so far away. . . ."

Stepan Ognev came up to them, dug his spade into the parched ground, and listened for a while to Pakhom's tale.

"Do you want to die in a strange place?" he said. "Are the graves there better than the graves here?"

"But what can I do, Stepashka? What can I do?" Pakhom raised himself to his knees. "You advise me how I can manage not to die of starvation. Do you think it's sweet to go away, the devil knows where? Do you think I want to go away?" He wiped away a tear. "I'm only sorry that death didn't take me away before this."

"We'll find something for you here. We've got hands, and there's always something for them to do. Only we must think it over together."

"You're always talking big." Mitka took a final puff at his cigarette. "But there's as much sense in what you say as there is in this." He threw the cigarette-end on the ground and crushed it into the dust with his bare, dirty heel.

"You mustn't talk like that," Pakhom said. "It's silly. Stepan's got a good head on his shoulders, a good head. . . ."

2

The days ran on and the nights grew shorter; hotter and hotter burned the sun, seeming to weigh down upon the dry, cracked earth.

The women were maddened by the fear of approaching famine; the peasants walked along the streets, silent and gloomy, or sat on the benches in the yards, their long arms, with swollen veins, hanging listlessly at their sides. Some clambered on to the shed roofs and stared at the sky, looking for clouds.

No clouds came.

"They've run away somewhere. . . . Somewhere it must be pouring, but here in Shirokoye there's never a cloud."

There came days and nights of grief and anxiety. Every heart was heavy and oppressed by peasant bitterness and anger.

Then a rumour spread over the village.

"In Kamyshlov, about a hundred and fifty *versts* from Shirokoye, there's a widow whose ikon is working miracles."

At first nobody would believe the tale, but when it was said that miracles had occurred in several places—in Zuzina, Ermolovka, Ilim—the women of Shirokoye became excited. At evening, wrapped in their shawls, they ran along the backs of the houses down to the river Alai, silent and hurrying as if to meet a secret lover. This was the place chosen by Aunt Grunya Gurianova; there the women she had selected met at night and, scarcely conscious of the mosquitoes, knelt on the river-bank and prayed to the Virgin Mother for a sign. . . .

The days ran on. In the fields the crops wilted, the rivulets dried up, the cattle grew thin and swarms of insects darkened the air.

The peasants became angrier; their eyes held a wolfish glitter, their steps were soft, stealthy, thievish. . . . The women's foreheads were covered in bumps, their bodies sore from the bites of insects; for seven nights they had prayed at the water. Some had lost faith, and came no more, like exhausted cows which leave the herd; the others continued to pray, silently, while tears streamed down their cheeks, earnestly imploring the Mother of God to come to their help. Zinka's eyelids drooped, she could hardly keep them open with her fingers. Her back ached; her whole body ached, her head was heavy as lead, but she controlled her distress and went on praying.

"I'll try to bear it, and then she will help me. She'll bring Kirka to his senses, and perhaps she'll give me a baby . . . only one," Zinka prayed, and beat her forehead on the river-bank.

Another rumour followed.

"At Zubovka, thirty *versts* from Shirokoye, a holy virgin was in a trance for seven days, and when she got up on the eighth day the angels led her to church. The people who were at mass saw her, and in one hand she held a piece of meat, and in the other some green grass. That meat cures

every sort of sickness, the lame can walk when they've touched it, and the blind can see. If we brought some of the grass to the village, the rain would be sure to pour down."

That night Grandfather Maxim Fedunov brought the news of the holy virgin to the women at the river, and added:

"Go there, my children. It's thirty *versts* along the Tatar road, straight on, and don't leave the road. There you'll find the holy virgin. Take some of the grass and bring it back to our village, to our fields. But you must hurry, because Heaven has not given her much grass, and soon it will all be gone."

Early in the morning, before the shepherd Fila had blown his horn or the shaggy sheep-dog had answered with his long-drawn howl, Aunt Grunya Gurianova and Zinka started out on the road to Zubovka.

That same evening some peasant women from Zubovka and Kamyshlov came into Shirokoye, fell on their knees before the church and moved, still on their knees, to the door of the church, singing hymns to the Lord.

Astonished, the villagers of Shirokoye watched them.

"There is a miracle here," one of the strangers cried to them. "An angel is flying about in your church, under the cross, and the ikon at the door has become new."

"It wouldn't be bad if we could keep them here in the church," Markel Bykov thought, "if only Ognev and his police didn't keep us in chains for it." The prospect terrified him.

"Don't you blaspheme!" he shouted to the women.

3

At mid-day, when the sun was at its hottest, and the horses, wearily flicking from their bodies the swarms of flies, sought shade from its rays, Grunya and Zinka descended the footpath from the Shikhan hills to the Alai; they walked slowly, their heads bent.

"What shall we say? What shall we say?" Grunya whispered.

At the river they were greeted by a volley of questions from the women assembled there.

"The virgin is dead," Grunya burst out unexpectedly. "She died on the eighth day."

The women sobbed and the two ambassadors bent their heads lower; together they walked up into the street. In the street their cries mingled with the chanting of hymns, disturbing the after-dinner nap of the villagers of Shirokoye.

Kirka came out of his house, glanced at the women, spat on the ground and muttered, as he shot the long iron bolt of the gate:

"You can go on singing, you can."

He went up into the hayloft and lay down on the tumbled, silky straw. It smelt of rye and stale manure. Beyond the fence a bumble-bee droned and sparrows chirped; above him, under the roof, the flies buzzed lazily. From Bykov's yard Kirka heard the gruff, monotonous voice of Pavel.

"Not this one, that one. Not this one, that one."

Kirka rose and looked over the fence; in Bykov's yard stood the horse, already harnessed; one foot was tangled in the reins. Pavel was bending forward, shouting:

"Not this one, that one. Not this one, that one."

The animal stamped its feet on the parched ground and flattened its ears; it could not understand Pavel and was consequently angry. Pavel continued to shout, as he rapped the handle of his whip on the horse's knees:

"Not this one, that one. Not this one, that one."

Ulka came out of the shed.

"Oh, what a brain! Can't you clear the reins away?" She stroked the horse's leg and said gently:

"Lift this foot, Bulanka."

Bulanka immediately raised one leg; Ulka disentangled the reins. Pavel sniggered and pressed a dirty finger against Ulka's breast.

"Get away, snotty nose!" She slapped his cheek with a wet hand and ran to the door. From there she pulled a face at him and cried mockingly:

"Not this one, that one. Oh, you tadpole."

She went indoors; for some time Pavel fussed about the horse, pulling the reins from side to side and winding them round his arm; then he sat in the cart, tumbled down and squatted on the ground by its side, drawing with the whip-handle the outline of a huge horse's hoof in the dust of the yard.

Kirka sighed, and lay down again on the straw.

"Why must it be like this? Why must a man carry such chains about on him? He's got the right to tear the chains

off, but he doesn't do it. That fool Panka there. . . . And Ulka too; they'll go down to their graves with the chains round their necks."

His thoughts turned to Zinka.

Kirka was furious because Zinka had gone to Zubovka, and had gone secretly. At first he had decided that, as soon as she returned, he would tell her to find another life-companion, to continue her life with another. He was determined to do that. . . . At first he thought of giving her the cow, and keeping the horse for himself. The cow was of an excellent breed, and he had reared it himself, had carried it in his arms when it was a helpless little calf. Now Kirka's cow was the finest in the whole herd. He was sorry to part from it. Kirka decided to keep the cow. And Zinka? Well, Zinka could have the sheep. . . . But Kirka himself had selected the sheep; more than once he had gone the fifty *versts* to the Soviet farm on account of the sheep, and now some stranger would have them, and he would be sure to kill off the best breeders, he would not care about them at all. No, Kirka would not give the sheep away either. The best thing to do (of course he would not part from the horse until his death) was for Kirka to take all the cattle and grain, and Zinka could have the house; let her live there. But then, again, Kirka had expended so much strength in building the house; was it for strangers that he had spent so many sleepless nights, and bent his back over the bog, working as hard as ten men put together? Sometimes . . . well, perhaps sometimes he had not acted quite honourably, but was he now to give his house away to a stranger, and again spend sleepless nights and aching days building another house? No, he would not give the house away. But what about Zinka? Helplessly he spread out his arms. There was nothing for her to have. . . .

It seemed to Kirka that he and Zinka were fettered by a strong chain; one end of it was round his neck, the other round Zinka's. He was pulling in one direction, and Zinka pulled in the opposite direction. Or rather, Zinka was not pulling at all; she stood determinedly on one spot, waiting for Kirka to stop pulling, so that they might go along together again, happy as a young bride and bridegroom, following the same road. . . .

When they reached Kirka's house, the women stopped their singing, whispered to each other and then dispersed.

Zinka wanted to open the gate; her heart contracted painfully and her hands trembled.

"What is it? The gate locked?" She called: "Kiryusha!"

"Who's there?"

"Me, of course! It's me!"

"Oh, it's you. Well, go on praying to God, perhaps He'll open the gate for you. I'm not the doorkeeper."

Zinka rapped her fist lightly on the gate; her legs were giving way, and her back ached from the long journey. She would have liked to lie down, just there by the gate, and fall fast asleep. At first she sobbed quietly, then louder. Her breath came in short, violent gasps.

"Don't whine; your tears don't move me, they only make me angry."

The sobbing ceased. Stepan Ognev came up to the gate and spoke softly to Zinka; then he clambered over the fence, and went up into the hayloft. Stepan sat down by Kirka's feet, his eyebrows drawn into one thick, straight line.

"What are you lying here for the third day? The women are all excited, they want to have a procession, and everybody's upset and a bit beside themselves. And you're lying here on the straw. You ought to get a good thrashing," he added angrily. "Well, why don't you say something?"

"A thrashing? It's always easy to find someone to do that, but who's going to heal the wounds?"

"Who? The army!" Ognev cried. "They'd soon cure you in the army. At the front there were worse wounds, but if the Commissar called, they got better in a minute. Got a pain, have you? Well, you think of the real troubles there are; the people are dying from the heat, everything's going to rack and ruin, and you sleep here, dreaming of your own little aches and pains—a little pimple and all this fuss. You've got to show some initiative now, you've got to pull everybody together, organise them and lead them to fight the famine like one man—and just look at you and your pimple. Had a quarrel with his wife, and runs away and hides himself in the straw. Yes, you've forgotten everything that Lenin called us on to. . . ."

At first Kirka was enraged by Ognev's words, but at the mention of Lenin's name he smiled bitterly.

"But, Uncle Stepan, what can I really do? Can I put a mattress over the sun, or send it a note and tell it it mustn't dare to shine so hot, eh?"

"Oh, you fathead," Ognev laughed. "You've got so used to your scraps of paper. Look here," he continued seriously, "the new allotments take up about three hundred *dessiatins*. We must build a dam over the Alai and irrigate the allotments, so that if nothing comes of the crops, there will at least be potatoes and pumpkins from the allotments. That will see us through. Do you understand?"

"I've also thought of that, but will the people agree?"

"Oh, you're a regular scarecrow, and yet they say our chairman is famous throughout the whole district. Of course, the people must be organised, welded together, persuaded; we must show them: here, on one side, is the grave, and here, on the other, there is life, life for you and life for your children. We would rather die than live—what do you think? Do you think they won't understand that? Come on, let's go."

They went down from the hayloft.

"Kirill Senafontich, I just wanted to see you," Markel Bykov called out as he came up to the fence.

"Yes?"

"Well," Markel scratched his backside, confused because Ognev was there. "You know what the people are like, they've all gone mad. They want to go about with the ikons to pray for rain."

"A procession?"

"Well, yes. That's about it."

"What's all this about, Markel Petrovich? Going for a walk won't help us."

"I know." Markel shrugged his shoulders . "I believe in it just as little as you do, but there's no doubt they want it."

"Well, what about it?" Kirka turned to Ognev and smiled. "I've got nothing against it myself. If you want to pray, pray; and if you don't want to, then don't. When do you want it for?"

"To-day, at evening mass, and to-morrow morning, with the ikons. . . ."

"All right, have it with God's blessing."

"Well, that's fine, that's fine," Markel murmured and ran back to the shed where the believers—Nikita Gurianov, Chizhik and Shlenka—were waiting for him.

"Well, do you see?" Kirka laughed.

"Yes. Do you know what we'll do?" Ognev bent towards Kirka and whispered in his ear for two or three minutes, gesticulating vigorously as he spoke.

"We'll do it," Kirka said. "It won't be hard."

Stepan went home and Kirka entered his house.

Zinka sat in one corner, rubbing off from the ikon the chalked picture of a pig's head, sobbing and whispering softly to herself:

"He did it, to mock God. . . . He wanted to insult God, and the holy virgin also . . . they said she had some miracle grass, and then some people said she was making spirits, and they took her away to the police-station. . . . Oh, God, don't let them do it."

Then other thoughts came into her head, shuffling and scrambling like people who have lost their way on a dark night. She tried to see them clearly and stared into the darkness until her eyes ached, but she could not distinguish them.

"Oh, God! Oh, Holy Mother of God, don't let them do it!" Again she sighed, and dropped on her knees before the ikon; with her right hand she crossed herself, murmuring a scarcely audible prayer.

"Just like a priest!" Kirka laughed, looking into the room. "What did you jump for? Moses, or whoever it was, prayed on his knees for three days, they say, and you stop as soon as you see me. Bang your head hard on the floor, perhaps something will come out of it."

He looked through the open window into the street, which slumbered in the heat-mist. Even the flies had withdrawn into the shade. Only in Pakhom Pchelkin's yard the pigs sprawled in the cool mud by the well and Simon, Akulina Chessalkina's son, lay dozing by the fire-house, his head resting against a barrel.

Ilya Maximovich entered noiselessly and sat down by the stove. Zinka showed him the pig's head on the ikon.

"Speak to him, Daddy."

Ilya Maximovich looked at Kirka's bowed back and shook his head reproachfully.

"Simon," Kirka shouted through the window. "Hi, my young cavalier, are you asleep?"

"E-eh?" the answer came through the window.

"Don't you 'eh' me. Buzz off to the priest and tell him that the chairman requests his presence urgently. There's a message for him from the town, and he must sign for it."

"Will you give me some tobacco for going?"

"Yes, I'll give you two whole ounces. And on the way call

in at Petka Kudeyarov's and tell him to get a quart of the best. And tell him properly, do you understand? Like this: 'The chairman has ordered you to get a quart of the best!' Now, clear off."

"What do you want the spirits for?" Zinka asked uneasily. "Are you going to take to drink now? That's all I was short of."

"Look here, Kiryusha," Ilya Maximovich said. "Have you taken leave of your senses, or what?"

"What are you up to?" Zinka screamed. "We can't show our faces in the village, and all because of you. And now you're going out on the loose. You torture your wife and everybody else. You do, you do."

"That's nonsense, Zinushka. You're getting all worked up about nothing." Ilya Maximovich stroked her head and glanced at Kirka. But Zinka continued to scream through her sobs:

"You should hold your tongue about God, and not blaspheme. God's got patience, long patience, but after that——"

"All right, give me time."

"No, that's not the point at all, not at all. Oh, you women, instead of healing a wound you only make it bigger. Look here, Kiryusha, you can tell me what you're really about. After all, I'm not a fool, and I'm no stranger to you. What have you got into your head? Don't forget, it's dangerous to play with peasants; they beat you down. Come on, tell me."

Kirka sighed deeply and sat down on the bench. He had thought of getting out of Plakushchev's grasping, sticky hands, and here was Ilya Maximovich talking to him kindly and affectionately.

"We want to build a dam . . . to irrigate the valley."

"Oh, that's fine, I'll join in it also. I've got nothing to say against it. We must build a dam, and we'll all work at it together. And don't you get angry all the time and curse," he added, turning to Zinka. "That's a fine idea of your husband's, he means business. Well, now I'll be getting along and talk it over with some of them."

Ilya Maximovich went out.

Kirka watched him through the window, frowning. Then he turned to Zinka.

"Where's the jam?"

"In the cellar," Zinka murmured through her tears. "What do you want it for?"

"That's my business."

He went down into the cellar. Zinka hiccoughed, and then began to cry in a thin, dry tone. Gradually her sobs grew louder; she muttered to herself, and, seeing that he did not reappear, screamed down to him:

"And as for her—your Ulka—I'll scratch her eyes out. You wait and see, I'll scratch her eyes out!"

Kirka shook himself and, to drown her voice, began to sing the "International." There was a heap of pumpkins in one corner; he glanced at them and thought:

"What a witch she is. People are dying of starvation, and she's got heaps of pumpkins rotting away in the cellar. And anyway, she's barren. What's the use of a wife who doesn't have any children? She's a pickled cucumber, not a woman."

He thought of Ulka, fresh and vigorous. In her arms she carried a small boy, as like to Kirka as one drop of water to another.

"Foo!" he spat, and laughed to himself. "What is Comrade Zhdarkin thinking about? Let it alone! There's serious work to be done, and here you are thinking of women, you silly devil."

4

Mishka rang the bell for evening mass.

The broken notes of the cracked bell rang through the sultry air, through the open windows and doors of the peasants' huts, calling to prayer.

The women crossed themselves, the men smeared butter on their hair, the young people put on their Sunday best. Soon the people of Shirokoye were on their way to the tiny village church. Markel Bykov marched at the head of the long file; he wore boots with pointed toes, and walked very solemnly. Behind him came Mitka Spirin, in torn women's galoshes, Petka Kudeyarov and Nikita Gurianov; they were followed by the women, wearing grey kerchiefs, and the young people in holiday attire. Last of all came Grandfather Maxim Fedunov, choking from the dust, trotting along like an old goat behind the herd.

Swaying unsteadily, Kirka came up to the fence and

watched the procession of true believers. When they had passed he turned back and said to Simon:

"As soon as they've all disappeared, take Bykov's camel and harness it, and then you get hold of him, he's laying there like a sack. And now you remember what I told you. Put him in the cart, and take him to the church. Only mind it all goes well. I'll be at the Soviet."

Two calves trotted out of the lane into the Krivaya street and stopped at Mitka Spirin's yard. Suddenly, as if at the word of command, they began to low, stretching their necks towards the gate. They were followed by the cows, who raised clouds of dust as they moved, their heavy udders shaking from side to side. Behind the cows came some sheep, running uneasily into each other.

"Oh, you beasts!" Ulka cried, running out of Bykov's yard.

The sheep scattered and drew together again, staring foolishly at the oak posts of the fence and at the gate. Suddenly they ran along the street, followed by the peasants who had remained at home, and who had been attracted out of their homes by the noise. The peasants made more noise than the animals themselves; as the sheep were caught, they were led back into the yards.

Ulka caught her sheep at the corner of Pyriakin's hut and dragged it home by the forelegs. Passing the village Soviet, she glanced over her shoulder at Kirka. She had been running, and her cheeks glowed rosily under the sunburn; her high, well-developed breast moved rhythmically under the thin cotton blouse. From the window above Kirka saw her breasts, pressed close together like two white doves, through the open collar of her grey blouse.

"What are you staring at?" Ulka cried, imperceptibly slackening her pace.

Kirka flushed and wanted to reply, jokingly:

"You ought to cover them up."

He was silent.

"Well, you old witch, what are you staring at?" Ulka cried again.

"Oh, she's saying that to the sheep," Kirka thought.

"Ulka!" he shouted, leaning out of the window, "why don't you tell the old devil to drag the sheep out of the church as well as the candles?"

Ulka stopped, rubbing her shoulder with her left hand, and shook her head.

"Never mind about the devil, you come out and help to do it."

Kirka smiled and looked away.

"It isn't suitable for me as chairman. I wasn't elected for the sheep. I was elected for"—he paused, and added after a moment's reflection—"for the bumble-bees."

"Look at him, sheep aren't good enough for him. But bumble-bees sting."

"What does that matter? They've got fine voices."

"What a chatterbox you've become, Kirill Senafontich!" Ulka smiled, smoothed her dress and dragged the sheep a little farther.

"Ulka!"

"What is it this time?" She stopped, shook her head, and went on to the gate. Kicking it open, she pushed the sheep into the yard; the others followed; Ulka folded her arms and stared at the Soviet house.

"What a fool I am," Kirka muttered, looking at her. "If the people see us, they'll never stop talking about it."

He left the window and sat down at the table, but after a moment rose and again looked at Ulka through the window.

A few sheep still wandered about the street, the calves lowed, and the younger children, left alone in the huts, cried unceasingly. A camel, harnessed to a cart, lurched out of Kirka's yard and the curious conveyance lumbered along the street towards the church.

"Kirill Senafontich, you devil, what have you been up to? The priest with the camel," Ulka cried, and ran along the street, laughing loudly.

The church was filled by the faithful believers.

The women stood on the left, their lips pressed severely together, and a solemn expression on their faces which seemed to say: "Only in Thee, the Almighty, do we believe and trust," while each was thinking: "Have they milked the cow? Have they put the cakes in the oven?"

The men stood on the right, looking down and longing to sleep. At the back Markel Bykov stood by his candle-box, stroking his beard and selling candles. As he rattled the copper coins, he thought of his approaching death, of his children, who did not take after him, and of Kirka, who was always laughing at him, the scoundrel. When Ulka came into the church, following close behind the priest, he thought of her:

"She's a pretty young thing. Even the peasants make eyes at her. . . . Tasty!"

Everybody was bewildered. Swaying unsteadily from side to side, Father Kharlampy walked up to the altar; his hair was untidy, his arms hung down helplessly and his lips were thrust forward, as if he was about to spit.

"Look at him, how worried he is," the women whispered.

The men bent their heads lower, and dug their elbows gently into the peasants at their side.

Father Kharlampy stood at the altar, while the sexton opened his book, ready to accompany the service. The priest stepped down, stood for a few moments by the rail and again took his place at the altar.

"What's up with him?" Markel thought. "Something's happened. I expect Kirka's been up to something."

He locked the candle-box, slipped the key in his pocket and walked hurriedly along the central aisle towards the altar.

He was about to mount the first step when Father Kharlampy again came down from the altar and stared at the worshippers with dim eyes. He raised his hand slowly and, as he spoke, brought it down sharply a number of times, as if he were beating somebody.

"I want to tell you. . . . Look here, the women mustn't come to my church if they haven't washed. You can't come here dirty and all the rest of it. Not when you come to church. Do I have to wash, or don't I?"

Mitka Spirin darted forward and cried:

"Hi, you! What are you growling about? What nonsense is this? That's not your job. What do you mean by baths? We'll give you a bath, we will!"

Elena pulled her husband by the sleeve.

"Mitya, be quiet!"

"What is he? Is the church his? It's not his, it's ours."

"All right, all right, it's yours." Kharlampy laughed childishly, and fell down by the altar rail.

The believers whispered to each other; suddenly Akulina Chessalkina began to scream; the men shouted and the young people laughed loudly. Chattering noisily to each other, they trooped out of the church and along the street. Simon Chessalkin ran to meet them.

"Come along to the meeting, citizens!" he cried. "We're going to arrange about the taxes and so on."

5

Night drew on, and the darkness spread over the dilapidated roofs of the huts, quenching the brightness of the slated roof on Yegor Stepanovich Chukhliav's house; even the straw on Shlenka's roof seemed smooth and orderly.

The village meeting was held by the fire-house where, in the daytime, the sparrows chirped continuously and Simon Chessalkin dozed against the barrel.

"It's time to sleep now," Grandfather Pakhom Pchelkin thought, as he gazed at the meeting, at the table dimly lighted by a single candle, and at Kirka. "And they've just started on this everlasting business."

"Citizens," Kirka began, leaning forward over the table. "The meeting is hereby opened. Will you please nominate a chairman for to-day's meeting."

"What? Another chairman?" Pakhom muttered, scratching his head. "Another one?"

"You'll do, Kirill Senafontich."

"Let's have someone else for a change. Why should it always be me?"

"Nikita Gurianov," Mitka Spirin cried.

"He'll do."

"Let's have him."

"Come along, Nikita."

"Let's have Nikita."

Kirka glanced in the direction of the shouting; by the willow tree, against which Nikita Gurianov was leaning, stood a group of peasants, who had been calling for Nikita. Gurianov was whispering to them and pointing to the table.

"Oh! so the whole regiment's come out to meet me," Kirka thought. Aloud he said: "Well, we'll write down Nikita Gurianov's name."

"Zhdarkin, Kirill Senafontich," Petka Kudeyarov cried, jumping on to the stool by the table. "Kirill Zhdarkin, Kirill Senafontich."

"I'll put it to the vote," Kirka said. "All those for Nikita Gurianov."

"Take the vote for yourself first."

"No, for Nikita."

"One after the other."

"Who is for Nikita?"

"Come on, citizens," the men at the tree cried. "Hold your hands high for Nikita."

"Vote for Nikita!"

"Don't be shy, citizens. There's nothing to be afraid of."

"I want to speak!" Pakhom shouted.

"You'll be able to speak afterwards."

"But I'll forget by then. It's about the cows. They're being taken to pasture in the wrong place."

"That'll come after."

"But I . . ."

"Do be quiet, Grandfather!"

"Eh, they won't let me say a word. It's not like it used to be. We used to be able to talk as much as we liked, and talk. . . ."

"Who is for Nikita Gurianov?"

By the willow tree about twenty hands were raised.

"Not enough," Petka Kudeyarov cried. "You've got as many votes as a horse has feathers."

"Count. . . . Take the count."

"I am counting," Manafa replied.

"Now take the vote for yourself."

"All right. Whoever wants to vote for me, please raise your hands."

"Citizens!" Petka Kudeyarov stretched out his arms. "We're taking the vote for Kirill Senafontich Zhdarkin. Up with your hands!"

Stepan Ognev raised his lantern, illuminating the sunburnt faces of the peasants, some bearded, some clean-shaven.

"One, two, three," Manafa began. "Please keep your hands up, citizens. Three, four. Hi, you, what's up with you? Is that your elbow, or what? If you want your hand up, then put it up. Five, six. . . ."

"A lot!" somebody cried.

Kirill Senafontich received the majority of votes.

"Well," he began, "we have two questions on the agenda to-day: the first is about the taxes, and the second is whether we should divide our village community into groups. Under other business we shall discuss the proposal to build a dam over the river Alai in order to irrigate the valley. Are there any other questions you want raised?"

"No."

"That'll carry us on till morning, anyhow."

Kirka began to read, in a rapid, clear voice:

"The question of taxation is very urgent, and should be discussed immediately at a meeting of all citizens. The results of the discussion should be reported at once to the Executive Committee. Is that quite clear?"

The peasants were silent, fingering their torn trousers and shirts; there was a rustling sound, as of reeds whispering faintly in the evening breeze.

"We understand all right, but still it isn't quite clear," somebody murmured.

"I want to speak," Mitka said.

"All right; Spirin will speak."

"It's quite clear," Mitka began, standing on the bench. "In fact, it's a bit too clear. Only this is what I've got to say about it, where shall we get it from? We're not against paying the taxes, brothers, but what can we pay with? There's not a radish in the fields."

Mitka had spoken to the peasants quietly, but with the utmost seriousness in his voice. They answered him, all speaking at the same time.

"Who knows whether there'll be any crops at all?"

"And they want taxes."

"Where can we get it from?"

"That's enough. Cut it out of the agenda."

"And don't put it back again."

"It's easy enough to talk about taxes."

"You don't have to pay anything."

"It's always us, us. We always have to pay. When will you take something from the poor peasants?" Filat Gusev growled from the willow tree. "When will they pay something?"

Grandfather Pakhom, who had been half asleep, woke up and, pushing his way through the crowd, shouted:

"And anyhow, who wants taxes? Why can't we live without any taxes at all? What do we want them for? We won't pay, and that's all. It's quite easy, we won't pay."

"And when will the poor peasants pay something?" Filat Gusev reiterated again and again.

Gradually the clamour ceased.

"Is that all?" Kirka asked.

The peasants were silent, fidgeting and clearing their throats.

"I am surprised at you," Kirka said calmly. "For so

many years you've been deciding your own life, and you still behave as if you were at the annual fair. What good do you do by shouting? None at all. If there's nothing in the fields, you won't be asked for anything. Just think for a minute what you've been asked to do. You were asked to discuss the question, from the legal side. Perhaps the law is not a right law, and then we shall have to change it."

He read the decree on taxation. The bearded faces around Nikita Gurianov grew more numerous and moved towards the group by the table, gathered around Zakhar Kataev. From time to time Kirka was interrupted by exclamations, hisses and shouts.

When the question of dividing the village community was broached, Gurianov's group pushed their way forward, shoving the other peasants aside, and kept up a continuous fire of interruptions. . . .

6

When the people left the church it had grown quite dark. George the Dragon Slayer looked down in anger from the ikon, and the Holy Mother of Kazan stared straight in front of her with eyes that bulged like onions. Markel had never seen her eyes like that before and several times, as he went up to the pulpit, he turned round to look at them.

Kharlampy was lying by the altar-rail. He had vomited on to the narrow strip of grey carpet, and a cat was licking the vomit, spitting as if it was lapping hot milk. Markel kicked the cat aside and dragged Kharlampy to his home.

"Take him, mother," he said, as he pushed the priest into the house. "He's finished his prayers, thank God!"

The priest's wife wrung her hands. Markel wiped the sweat from his face and walked through the gathering darkness to Akulina Chessalkina's hut. He knew that, since the death of her husband, the widow Chessalkina had been intending to sell the bee-hives which he had kept.

"God blesses the man who lives with bees," Markel murmured. "They don't steal from you, they bring wealth to their master."

As he passed the Soviet house, he stopped in bewilderment; Markel watched attentively for a few moments, and understood nothing. Illuminated by the light of several lanterns, the peasants were going, one by one, like a flock of sheep,

into Nikolai Pyriakin's yard. Kirka and Nikita Gurianov stood at the gate, calling out:

"Petka Kudeyarov, for the division."

"Matvey Trufilkin, for the division."

"Mitka Spirin, against the division."

"Merkushchev, for the division."

"Yafim Zdobnov, for the division."

"Fadey Gurianov, against the division."

"They've all gone mad," Markel thought. "But what is it they've gone mad about? Well, I must go. . . ."

He turned the corner and came to Akulina's hut.

"It would be fine if she let me have the bees for fifteen pud. But she won't, damn her. Still, it would be nice. Anyhow, I don't mind giving sixteen."

Carefully he lifted the latch of the gate and glanced round the yard to see if there were any dogs about—Markel was afraid of dogs. Reassured, he slipped noiselessly into the hut. Akulina was busy in the larder and called in to her son.

"Did you swear at him, Simka?"

"Yes," answered Simon, who was lying on the bed.

"Did you call him a swine?"

"Yes, I did. Give me something to eat."

"Did you tell him he was a swindler and a scoundrel and a thief?"

"Yes, a swindler and a scoundrel and a thief!"

"And even that's too good for him. You should have told him something else as well. You should have said: 'We haven't got a father, our father's dead, and it's lucky for you, or else he'd have shown you.' " Akulina came to the door and rapped on it with a wooden spoon. " 'He'd show you, he would, if he was alive.' "

"But who are you talking about?"

"Why, the tailor, of course, Markel Petrovich. He made a jacket for the boy, and the sleeves are all spoilt, the rogue that he is. He kept it and kept it, and at last I went to him and asked him if it was done at last, or if he meant to keep it for ever. And he says to me: 'Take it, Akulina, there isn't much to be done to it now, only to put the sleeves in, and you can do that yourself. I'm too busy.' Well, I took it." Akulina ran to the clothes-cupboard, pulled down a jacket made of grey military cloth, and shook it. "I took it, and I put the sleeves in, and now you just see what it looks like. He ought to have his beard pulled out for work like this. I

had a coat made for the boy, and spent my last kopek on it, and now he can't show himself in the street with it. You try it on, Simka. Show him."

"Oh, leave me alone!"

"Put it on, I say," Akulina screamed. "Put it on, you little devil. He worries me to death, he does. Put it on, I say. Put it on, you son of a bitch!"

"But I can see without that." Markel took hold of the coat and examined the sleeves.

At first he noticed nothing peculiar about them; the sleeves were like any other sleeves, there were no holes or patches; actually, they were rather well made; then suddenly Markel laughed.

"Did you put them in yourself."

"Yes, me myself, Markel Petrovich, me myself. Look, I pricked all my fingers."

"Well, look here, you've done them all wrong. You've put the right sleeve in the left armhole, and the left one in the right!"

"There you are!" Simon jumped down from the bed. "I told you so myself. I told you it was your fault; you'd done something wrong, and you only kept on swearing at the tailor."

"Shut up, shut up, you little devil. Don't you hang round your mother's throat, and keep your tongue still when your elders are talking."

"Oh, shut up yourself."

"There you are, you try to talk to him. Yes, if your father was alive he'd flay the skin off your bottom."

"Listen, Akulina," Markel interrupted her. "What about your bees? They say there's a heavy tax been put on bees."

"Where can I get the money to pay the taxes from?"

"They don't care where you get it from—give and that's all. But look here, since you're a relative of mine, although a distant one—through the blessed Semyon, God rest his soul—I'll give you some good advice. You give up the bees—sell them; then you'll be free of the taxes."

"But who can I sell them to? Who'll buy them? They say the fields look like they did in the black year."

"That's true! It's very hard to sell anything nowadays. There's a year of famine coming. Yes, yes. It's very hard. Perhaps, a lucky chance. . . . For instance, a little while ago, somebody was asking me if I didn't happen to know of

anybody who had some bees to sell about here. And I was so busy I didn't have the time to ask you. How much were you thinking of asking for them?"

"How much do you think I ought to ask, Markel Petrovich? You advise me. I've got twelve hives, and they're fine big ones, the bees are."

"Well, you ought to get eight puds for them," Markel drawled.

"Eight? No, I won't give them for eight. Why, in the spring they gave me two *chervonetz* for each hive, and you say eight puds for the whole lot."

"What does it matter about last spring?" Markel stood up. "The spring isn't paying. In the spring they gave me a hundred and fifty roubles for my pig, and if you took one to market now, you'd have to cry before they'd give you fifteen roubles for it. You can't count by the spring." Markel was quite cross by now. "You'd better take the eight puds. If your bees die, you won't even get that much for them."

"But, Markel Petrovich. . ." Akulina's face became a mass of wrinkles. "Just you think. You yourself sell a candle for five kopeks, and look how tiny they are, you can hardly see them. And these are bees, and besides the honey you can get enough wax from them to make a thousand candles. Would you sell your candles for three kopeks?"

"You sell them first," Markel thought, "and then I'll see how I sell." Aloud he said: "Never mind about the candles now, they're a gift to God, and this isn't a suitable place to talk about it; it's a great sin."

The bargaining went on for a long time, during which they also discussed their relatives and friends, and the state of the crops in the fields. Markel Petrovich continually directed the conversation on to the question of the famine, and of how many peasants had died in the black year.

"I only hope we won't have to dig fresh graves this year behind the threshing-ground. When there's a famine, the people who are left haven't even got the strength to carry the corpses to the cemetery, it's much more convenient to dig new graves behind the threshing-ground."

As soon as Simon had finished his meal and gone out into the street, Markel, like a vulture, swooped down on Akulina. He reminded her of the days when she was young—didn't she remember how she and Markel had played together? Yes, yes! The times were different then. It wasn't like now,

when each girl chose the boy she loved, and each boy took a maid after his own heart. It was different then; perhaps Markel would have married Akulina, and would have lived with her happily until his last hour.

Akulina was moved to tears and finally she consented to sell eleven hives to Markel Petrovich for twelve puds of rye.

Rejoicing at such a successful transaction, and planning to buy more bees, and to spend his days with them, Markel took leave of the widow.

In Kirka Zhdarkin's yard somebody was sitting huddled up on the bench.

"That must be Zinka," he thought. "I'll have a talk with her."

He advanced quietly.

"Why are you sitting there so quiet, god-daughter?"

Zinka shuddered and answered, after a short pause:

"I've just been to look at the greens, godfather."

"Greens? What greens are there now?" Markel muttered in dissatisfaction. "How can there be greens now? I know what sort they are. I've heard about them, and seen them with my own eyes, too."

He sat down by her side, in silence.

The peasants at the fire-house were making a great deal of noise.

Markel shook his head.

"No, god-daughter, it's really terrible to look at you; you're a martyr, you are." He leaned towards her and added softly: "It's a shame, the way he carries on in the village. What a wicked idea, to fill the priest up with spirits! But the sin won't be on the good father's head, it will fall back on to his, the blasphemer, and on to yours; it was in your house he put a holy person to shame."

As it was, Zinka's heart ached. She could not show herself in the village, for the women made her life a burden to her; and here was Markel rubbing salt into the wounds.

"He prides himself on the truth," Markel continued. "He says truth will out. But truth isn't always necessary. We've lived a long time, and we know when it's necessary and when it's better to keep the truth behind your teeth; that's the more sensible way sometimes. But him? He's made himself a great warrior for the Soviets all of a sudden. But if any trouble comes, they'll all run away from him like flies from

pitch, only sure enough the pitch will be smeared over his door; he can't escape that."

There was a painful, stifled feeling in Zinka's breast. She could not understand what was this unnecessary truth of which Markel was speaking. On the contrary, she had always demanded the truth from Kirka, the truth as to why he no longer loved her, why he was angry with her; but Kirka only snorted and was silent.

In the darkness they saw Ulka cross the street, running rapidly, but with an air of stealth. Zinka's heart beat faster and Markel watched his daughter-in-law until she disappeared from his sight.

"Where is she off to?" he thought. "So it's really true that she goes with Kirka. But no, I can hear his voice at the meeting."

He began to speak to Zinka of other things.

"He really ought to resign his post as chairman. It won't lead to anything good. Fedunov left it, and you look at him now. He's got a second racing horse, and his land's in a fine condition."

"It's not only the Soviet," Zinka answered wearily. "All the time he's reading books. He reads and reads and then he stands up in front of the picture of that man—that Lenin—and bangs his fist on his chest and shouts: 'You can rely on us, Comrade Lenin, we will carry out your will. We will carry it out.' Only what that will is, I can't understand."

"It's about the churches, I expect," Markel explained. "He's only got one idea in his head, to destroy all the holy places, and to make dancing-halls of them."

"Once I said to him: 'Kiryusha'—you know, only to try and get him away from it—'Kiryusha, the horse wants cleaning down,' I said. 'The horse is yours, and the cow's yours,' he said. 'Go and look after them yourself and leave me in peace.' "

"The man's gone quite mad," Markel muttered, after a short silence. Thinking of his own plans for getting rid of Kirka as chairman, he advised Zinka to obtain from her husband a formal, signed statement that he transferred everything to her.

"He gives me everything. 'There you are, you can have everything,' he said. 'Let's go to the Soviet, and we'll sign a form of separation, and I'll go off to the town. To live here is like a millstone round my neck.' "

"So it's gone as far as that! Take everything, eh? But he won't go away; he'll stay here and waste everything."

"I don't understand him," Zinka continued through her tears. "One minute he'll be swearing at me and curse me so terribly that I never want to speak to him again, and then the next minute he's so good and kind, and he'll start speaking of some new life. 'But what else do you want, Kiryusha?' I say to him. 'We've got a house, a horse, a cow, bread, and only two mouths to feed. We can live just as we like.' Then he gets terribly angry again and starts to scream at me. . . . I don't understand him."

"Somebody's put an evil spell on him."

At the fire-house the peasants shouted again.

"And whoever doesn't help won't get any water," Kirka cried.

"Nor any land."

"That's right."

"Vote for Kirill."

7

The peasants went home after the meeting, chattering volubly to each other in the darkness. Kirka said good-bye to Ognev and turned homewards, as exhausted as if he had been loading sheaves all day. But he was very happy; that day he, Ognev and Zakhar Kataev had taken the first step towards breaking down the old village community. True, there had been a good deal of strife at the meeting—Nikita Gurianov and Mitka Spirin had started a row, trying to delay any decision. At first they declared that there were no women present at the meeting, and that without the women no such important decision could be taken. Then the peasants were counted, and it was found that the number present greatly exceeded the required quorum. After that Nikita brought forward the question of the famine, spoke for a long time, and finally declared that he had no confidence in the tellers. The peasants were therefore passed one by one into Nikolai Pyriakin's yard, and their votes taken either for or against the division of the village community. The majority were in favour of division. This made Kirka happy, and he was also glad because all the peasants had agreed to start on the work of building the dam the following morning. At the same time, however, some incomprehensible sorrow oppressed his heart.

"What is it?" he thought. "Why am I like this? When I'm with people, I feel all right, but as soon as I'm alone I get miserable."

As he neared his house, he heard Markel's voice from the bench.

"Well, they're coming, and I must be getting along now. I've bought Akulina's bees, and I want to go home and tell the family. They'll like it."

"But do speak to him, godfather. He's a bit afraid of you."

"I will. Only he's always laughing at me. But you wait, there'll soon be nothing for him to laugh at."

Kirka turned sharply and went down towards the Alai. He sat down on a stone at the place where the women washed their linen. The river played softly between the thick willow trees, the evening coolness surrounded him, washing away his weariness. A calf was wandering over Mitka Spirin's allotment, nibbling at the young pumpkins. Kirka wanted to lie down; he slipped from the stone on to the cold sand.

Frogs screeched in the bog, and a dog barked in the Krivaya street; from Zaovrazhenoye came the sound of boys singing to the music of the harmonica:

"We've got a chairman, Kirka,
Who rules the Soviet's life.
He makes eyes at Ulichka
And doesn't look at his wife."

"The little bastards!" Kirka growled. "What's got into them, that they can't stop talking of Ulka! That's Nikita up to his tricks again."

Nevertheless, the song pleased him. He lowered his head and ran his fingers over the wet sand. Then he stood up, intending to go home, but the sound of somebody walking barefooted in the water arrested him. He looked round: a woman was walking along the edge of the small bay, stretching her neck and calling in a loud voice:

"Tel-tel-tel-tel!"

The syllable echoed clearly about the river. Kirka stared more intently. The figure on the opposite bank was familiar. At that moment the woman disappeared among some bushes and came out after a few moments on the farther side of the bay.

Again she called: "Tel-tel-tel-tel!"

"Ulka!" Kirka cried.

The woman started, noticed Kirka and answered:

"That's me. Who are you?"

"What are you doing here at this time of night? Aren't you afraid the evil spirits will come and tickle you?" Kirka laughed. He realised that this would give the villagers another opportunity to gossip, but it was not his fault.

"Afraid of who?"

"The evil spirits, I said. There's lots of them in the bath-house."

"I'm not afraid of those devils, Kirill Senafontich. My own father-in-law is enough of an evil spirit for me, much worse than those in the bath-house. Our calf hasn't come home yet, and if I don't find it they'll worry me to death."

"But there it is, in Spirin's allotment."

"At Mitka's again! The dirty dog."

Raising her skirts, Ulka ran quickly across the bay and on to the bank.

"They torture me to death. My mother-in-law's enough by herself. She's cursing me all day long, calls me a bitch and a dirty beast. And then the old man won't leave me in peace. He's always pinching me. I told him to leave me alone. 'Stop it,' I said. 'It's a sin. You're churchwarden, and you carry on like this with your own daughter-in-law.' But he said that old men like to touch young women much more than the young men do. 'You old snuffler,' I said. 'You old snuffler, who'd look at you?' Oh, what have I been saying?" Ulka drew back.

Kirka thought of the day by the fence, when her eyes complained of sorrow. Was this the grief of which they complained? Involuntarily he seized her by the shoulders.

"No, tell me. Tell me everything. You needn't be afraid."

Ulka sat down on the stone, drawing patterns in the sand with her bare foot. After a while she shook her head decisively; her hair came down. She caught it up and turned to Kirka with a faint smile.

"Oh, well, it's all the same. . . . I'd have to tell somebody, and as you asked me, you can have the answer. I can't go out of the house any more. . . ." Ulka continued in a lower voice: "If I go to the threshing-ground, he runs to the threshing-ground after me, and if I go to the bath-house he follows me there, and he's always pinching me. And what am I? I'm not made of wood, am I?"

She was silent. Kirka longed to take her in his arms, to press her tightly to himself, to tell her everything that he was thinking, but courage failed him.

"Oh, Ulka," he said softly. "Why didn't I meet you first?" And then, in louder tones: "And you . . . aren't you afraid of sin? Are you?"

Ulka smiled, looked down at her bare legs, and then at Kirka.

"Sin? Who with? If it's somebody you love and want, it isn't a sin. Kirill Senafontich, I don't wish anyone . . . That Pashka—foo!" She spat in disgust. "The slimy frog, he's always drooling; the first night——"

Ulka shuddered and was silent. Then, straightening herself, she bent nearer to Kirka. He saw the hollows under her eyes, her finely chiselled nose; the curls on her temples gleamed with a silvery light, like the ripples of the river against the bank.

"They torture me," she whispered. "Kiryusha, they're torturing you, too. You think I don't know, I'm only a woman. But I do understand, Kiryusha."

She stopped short, and they listened to the river playing among the willows, the gold-hammer crying over the bog, the soft rustling of the reeds.

Kirka put his arms about her. Ulka stretched her lips towards him, eagerly. Suddenly she crumpled—Ulka, who had always been so strong, so self-contained and hardy—as if all the bones had been extracted from her body.

They started at the sound of a horse galloping by. It was Kirka's horse, and Zinka and Markel Bykov were running after it.

"Kiryusha!" Zinka cried. "The colt's run away."

"Let's go away," Kirka whispered.

Together they crossed through the shallow water of the bay, and cut through the thick shrubbery, crossed the allotments and ascended the hill. Kirka and Ulka sat down under a hazel tree.

The leaves rustled softly, as if murmuring in their sleep.

"There's lots of nuts this year," Ulka said, laughing quietly.

"Yes, there are lots." Kirka laughed, too.

THE TENTH LINK

I

In the early morning, Kirka stood under the hazel tree and watched Ulka running down the hill. For a time she was lost among the bushes and trees, and appeared again on the other side of the river. When she had crossed the lane and entered the yard, Kirka went down an old, little-used pathway towards the valley, waving his hands to drive away the persistent flies.

He walked with a long, firm step, feeling as fresh as a horse which has just taken his bath in the river. At first the comparison made him smile, but the firmness of his gait, the elasticity of his body and the desire to sing and shout for sheer joy, confirmed the thought. He stopped, slapped his thighs, and stared down at Shirokoye and at Markel Bykov's house, whistling softly. He fancied that he could see Ulka running about in Bykov's yard; from time to time she stood still and waved her hand. Markel stood in the doorway, unmoving.

"Well, so that's how it is," Kirka murmured, without attaching any meaning to the words. He looked up and down the valley, trying to plan out the work that was to be done that morning. Where should the dam be built, and where should the canal be cut? These questions had to be considered, but against his will Kirka's thoughts turned in another direction. The elasticity of his body (he had experienced such a feeling only during the first few days after his return from the front) was as pleasant as it was to drink water from a fresh spring on a hot day. It was pleasant, too, that Ulka had not avoided him, had not turned away from him, but had spent the whole night with him, under the hazel tree on the hill. . . . She spoke without pause of Markel Bykov, of his behaviour to her, of Pavel, and of how terribly hard it was to live with the Bykovs. Kirka listened attentively, and himself lived through her degradation. As he listened, his hatred for Bykov grew greater, and not only for Bykov, but

for Plakushchev, too, and Gurianov and the whole village. He remembered the spoilt beetroots, the rotted pumpkins in Zinka's cellar, and Ognev's glass cucumber frames which had been broken in the spring. When Ulka drew his head down to hers with strong hands, and began eagerly and passionately to kiss his lips, his eyes, his long, arched nose, whispering: "Do you love me, Kirka? Do you love me?" Kirka fell for a short time into a state of semi-consciousness. At first he was silent; then, taking Ulka in his arms, he said, again and again:

"Can't you see? Can't you see?"

Now, in the morning, he thought of Ulka not only as a young, fresh woman, but as somebody very near to him, somebody he had known for many years. He had not touched her during the night; she had gone from him just as she came. He had been afraid of taking her, afraid of the gossip to which it might give rise. Still more, he was afraid of doing her an injury. He himself could have stood anything, the gossip and the insults, the loss of one or another friend in the village, but what about Ulka?

"You bloody fool!" he cursed himself. "You ought to have taken the chance, instead of sitting there with your mouth watering. Still," he argued, as he went down the hill, "you can't do yourself a good turn if it means hurting somebody else. It's true she's young, and quite innocent, and with an idiot of a husband like that she must want somebody. But you don't take somebody else's skin off to heal your own wounds; it's not right." He quickened his pace. "Besides," he added aloud, "you haven't lost anything, Kirka."

But the farther he went down the hill, the more he became conscious of a shivering throughout his body—at first it was like a faint breath of wind—of the fear of something vague, which nevertheless seemed to surround and envelop him, as darkness swallows the day. He knew from experience that this was the premonition of some trouble. . . . Perhaps somebody had started a malicious rumour in the village, perhaps it was only an unimportant trifle, which would not have disturbed other people. It had often happened to Kirka lately; he would feel restless and troubled, his whole body would begin to ache until he could find no rest, and then it turned out to be something wholly unimportant. And now he was overcome by such agitation, his heart contracted

so painfully, that he felt a strong desire to fall down on to the parched yellow grass, to beat his fists on the ground and to howl and bellow as a cow bellows when it is calving.

"But what is it? It can't be anything."

He pulled himself together and hurried forward, but after a few steps his pace slackened, he drooped like a plant near a huge fire, his long arms hung limply. Now he felt more like a hen after a farmyard battle than a freshly bathed horse.

"But what can it be, after all? Zinka?"

During the night he had not once thought of Zinka. Now he remembered her, but it was only as a well-fed peasant thinks of his dinner.

He sat down on a boulder of hardened clay, rested his head in his hands and, with the utmost concentration, searched for the cause of his anxiety.

"I've got it. That's it."

The previous year, upon Plakushchev's insistent advice, he had taken four sacks of wheat from the store of grain. It had happened in quite an accidental fashion. Ilya Maximovich had been dividing the grain for seed (Kirka was in the town at the time, and had entrusted the division of the seed to his father-in-law), and whether Ilya Maximovich had given short weight or whether there was more grain than the amount registered, after the peasants had each received his share four sacks of wheat remained in the barn. Kirka wanted to give the grain to somebody, but Ilya Maximovich objected.

"How can you give it away? You received one thousand, one hundred and twenty puds from the district, and you've distributed one thousand, one hundred and twenty. And if you give these sacks away, they're sure to ask you: 'Where did you get these sixteen puds from?' You'll only bring me into trouble and yourself, too, most likely. It would be best if you took it yourself, and not commit any sin."

Kirka took the four sacks of wheat.

"You fool! You blockhead!" He beat his forehead. "Empty head. As if there was any need to do that."

With troubled eyes he looked down at Shirokoye, and his glance rested on Plakushchev's house. Somehow it seemed to him that a thick rope stretched from Ilya Maximovich's yard up to the hill: one end was tied firmly to a peg in the ground, and the other end encircled Kirka. He was no

longer Kirill Zhdarkin, chairman of the village Soviet, but simply a thin, exhausted horse, whose body was covered with sores from whipping; and who dragged a heavy load.

2

Having learnt from Zakhar the decision taken by the meeting, Grandfather Katai got up early in the morning, before the rest of the household were awake, hastily splashed cold water over his wrinkled face and tottered out into the street. He ran from hut to hut, encouraging the peasants with feeble slaps on their bony shoulders.

"It's always best to avoid death. Death's always hiding round the corner, and you must hide round the next corner and poke your tongue out at him: try and catch me if you can."

"That's right, Granddad," the peasants smiled. "He tries to put you in the grave, and you trip him up: catch me if you can, and when you catch me I'll lay down. . . ."

Katai argued with the women.

"You women were created only for our ruin, you were."

"And where did you come from, I'd like to know?" the widow Lushka cried, her hands on her hips. "Where did you come from? You answer that."

"Oh, you shameless woman! You're quite shameless, Lushka. You women lead men astray, that's my opinion."

When the peasants from Zaovrazhenoye turned out, Katai, scolding Alexis and Peka for being so slow, took a spade, put it across his shoulder, and drew himself up like a soldier on parade.

"Where are you off to?" Khrestia wanted to take the spade away. "You'll lose whatever's left of you down there."

"You look here, old woman." Katai put his heels together and thrust his chin forward. "Look at me; I'm still good enough for the front. You can look after the house, and me and the boys will go and work. Zakhar, Peka, Leksy, come along!"

"Look at him! He's only got to take a few steps, and he starts to groan. And now he's swanking, he'll do such a lot of work."

"Come on, boys. Well, what are you grinning at?"

"There's nothing to laugh at," Zakhar put in. "Stop that laughing and come along!"

On the road to the valley, Katai fell behind. He had met Markel Bykov, who was taking his hives up the hill to the cherry orchard.

"What have you got there, Markel Petrovich?" Katai inquired.

"You can see yourself—bees."

"Oh, so you've started on that, have you? I always wanted to keep bees. Aren't you coming down to the valley?"

"I've sent two there already," Markel replied angrily, and went on.

"Oh, so that's how it is!" Katai murmured.

He crossed the bridge over the Alai, but before he could reach the valley he lost his breath, and sat down under a wild apple tree.

"Haven't got the strength. . . . I'll rest for a little while. It feels as if it was all frozen stiff inside me," he muttered, as he sat down on the grass.

The villagers passed by, villagers from Zaovrazhenoye, from the Krivaya street, from Burdiashka, their spades, axes and pitchforks clattering. A line of carts stretched along the road; a cloud of insects hovered over the horses. With the day came the heat; it grew more intense with every minute, as if blown out of some huge furnace. All those who passed before Katai's eyes had grown up in his sight, had married; some of them had children of their own now, grown-up sons and daughters. Unwillingly, wearily, the long trail moved on towards the valley, only shaken into some semblance of activity when the tractor appeared from the Krivaya street and rumbled noisily across the hemp-field. Behind the tractor marched the members of the fellowship, led by Stepan Ognev. He was followed by Davidka Panov, Ivan Shtirkin and Grigory Skulov. Behind them came their wives, while Yashka and Steshka brought up the rear.

"Inseparable," Katai murmured and called out:

"Yashka, Yashka, take me with you, dear, take me with you!"

"Ah, here's the most important man of all!" Yashka cried, coming up to Grandfather Katai. "Steshka, why have you left your godfather in the lurch? Have you forgotten how he married us two?"

"Be quiet!" Steshka waved him aside, and bent over Katai; she smiled to him tenderly, as if she were talking to Annushka:

"But, Grandfather dear, why are you left behind?"

"Here we are!" Yashka lifted him from the ground. "Steshka, you take the other arm. You'll be our Commissar, Grandfather. You sit there under the willow and order us about."

"Perhaps it would be better to go home. . . . Would you like us to take you home, Grandfather?"

"Oh no, not home. No."

Katai knew the nature of the peasants well. He had learnt to know it in the many years of his life. He remembered that once, in a year of famine, when the peasants were taking the landlord's hay to be sold in the town, they saw a stranger lying in the snow by the roadside. He was at the end of his strength, and had begged them, in the name of the Lord and of Jesus Christ, to take him along with them.

"Let me only hold on to the cart, peasants."

They passed by in silence, and on the way back they saw him again, frozen dead in exactly the same position as they had left him, only his head had fallen back, and the reddish beard was pointed to the sky. Katai still remembered the red beard and he knew that the peasant was savage when he was hungry.

"Each man for himself," he thought. "Each man for himself. If he's strong, he'll pull through, and if he's weak, he'll go under. There's reason to be afraid."

"See, you can sit here." Yashka placed Katai against the willow tree. "And let me have the spade, it might come in handy."

"No, no. Don't you touch my spade. I'll get up and do a little work later on."

"All right, and if you want anything, you just call me."

"I'll call you. Go on, now, and stir up the people, or else they'll get slack and flabby, and that will make the work still harder. . . . What are they doing over there?"

Kirka and Stepan Ognev, followed by a group of peasants, were walking about the valley, measuring the distances by paces; they walked away from each other, lay down on their stomachs, and called to each other:

"It'll be about six inches higher. Come a little nearer."

"They're making the plan, Grandfather." Yashka bent over Katai.

"What?"

"The plans. Nothing is done without a plan nowadays.

We worked without a plan on Brusski at first, and we couldn't manage it, so we had to start all over again from the beginning. We'll start properly in the spring, and everything will be as clear as the five fingers on your hand."

Petka Kudeyarov came out of the bushes and stood on a hummock; resting on his spade, he shouted:

"Hi, you engineers there. Will you be ready soon? The sun's nearly at dinner-time."

"You've only just got up, and you want your dinner already," Nikita Gurianov called back. To himself he muttered: "Why do I worry about him? What a lot of wickedness there is in all of us!"

Petka blinked and shook his head.

"Anyway, I don't come to you for my dinner."

"I should think not," Nikita said. "What the devil do I want you for? I feed my dog—he's useful to me, anyhow."

The peasants laughed; Ilya Maximovich pulled Nikita by the sleeve.

"Leave off," he whispered. "What do you want to quarrel for? It doesn't do any good."

Kirka and Ognev measured the valley, length and breadth, and discussed with the peasants the most suitable place to build the dam and dig the canal. Every peasant had a different proposal to make, and in each suggestion there was evident the desire to have the canal as near as possible to the particular peasant's allotment. Ilya Maximovich suggested, quite casually, that the canal should be made on the other side of the road. Everybody was surprised. What was the point of having the canal there? What good would it be on the other side of the road?

"He's thinking of his own allotment," Mitka Spirin cried, pointing with his spade to Cow's Island. "It isn't enough that he and Chukhliav grabbed all the land, they want the water as well. The whole world for them, and all the rest of us will sit squashed together in the dark."

"Oh no, no!" Ilya Maximovich protested. "What are you thinking about? What an idea!"

"Don't you even mention it," Nikita Gurianov burst out angrily. "Don't you even think of it, there's no sense in it at all."

"But what have I done? I only suggested that you should dig the canal on the other side of the road, and from there

the water will run down over all the fields. Look how high it is!"

"Why not have it in the sky?" Mitka shook his spade at the sky. "It will sure pour over everything from there."

"Yes, it would be much better there," Ilya Maximovich said hoarsely, and drew his jacket closer about him.

"There's no shame and no conscience in him," Zakhar Kataev said softly, but quite audibly.

Ilya Maximovich shrugged his shoulders. The peasants followed Kirka and Stepan.

"Now he's cross." Shlenka clapped his hands. "He's pouting like a young lady."

Ilya Maximovich stood aside, obsessed by gloomy thoughts. At the meeting the night before, when the peasants were filing into Nikolai Pyriakin's yard, he had said:

"I'm neither for nor against. I want to think it over."

Later he went to his relatives and friends, spoke to them of one thing and another, and at last put in a word or two about the division of the old community. "That wouldn't be bad in itself, but then, you see, they might drag you into their Commune." This suggestion had aroused their antagonism to the plan. The following morning some of them had gone to the Soviet house to ask Manafa to cross out their names. Still, there were only a few who supported Ilya Maximovich —the Gurianovs, the Bykovs, and Yegor Stepanovich Chukhliav. All the rest of the villagers followed Kirka and Ognev. The whole of Zaovrazhenoye supported Zakhar Kataev. Ilya Maximovich had tried to launch an attack, and they had turned on him and bitten him. Even that puppy, Mitka Spirin, also tried to bite.

These thoughts occupied Ilya Maximovich's mind; he tried to decide in what direction he should turn, inclining more and more towards going along with the others and waiting to see what might happen. At the same time he was deeply annoyed with himself for having voluntarily and thoughtlessly dissociated himself from the rest of the people.

"How stupid it was of me. Not for, not against! Couldn't I find anything better to say than that?" Plakushchev derided himself.

The peasants decided to cut the canal down the middle of the valley; although it might be better to dig it at the upper end of the valley and conduct the water, by making a bend, to the higher part of the valley, they had agreed upon this.

The dam was to be constructed about half a *verst* from the valley, at the junction of the Alai with the river Krutetz.

"Well," Kirka cried, after this decision had been arrived at. "Citizens, comrades! Let's start. Those of you who are building the dam, go up there, and those of you who are digging, go and dig."

"Say at least: Go with God's blessing," Zakhar smiled.

The people of Shirokoye moved off; the women and young people, who had been sitting about the valley in small groups, stood up. Petka Kudeyarov went up to his allotment.

"I'll dig for six yards, and then I'll go home."

Following his example, Mitka Spirin ran from Gurianov's allotment to his own.

"You're quite right. There's no point in digging near someone else's land."

Kirka and Stepan had not yet decided who should be sent to build the dam, and who should dig the canal, when the peasants ran quickly across the valley, each to his own allotment; some, whose land was farthest away, fell down from the speed at which they ran.

Ognev laughed.

"Look at them," he said to Kirka. "Your army's all scattered!"

"Individual economy," Shtirkin smiled.

Yashka sprang on to a hillock and shouted:

"Hi, run quicker, quicker! The water will drown you!"

"Stop!" Ognev shouted. "What's all this? Do you think the fellowship's going to build the dam for you, while you dig your little ditches next to your own allotments? No, that isn't good enough. That's not how we agreed to work. Come on, Kirill Senafontich, cut off their retreat!"

Kirill raised his spade and led about forty men, headed by Nikita Gurianov, towards the site of the dam. They went slowly, unwillingly, as if their feet were nailed to the ground.

"It would be better for each of us to work on our own allotments," Petka Kudeyarov protested. "We'd work much better that way. . . ."

"Come along, come along!" Kirka pulled him by the sleeve. "You can talk afterwards."

When Kirka and Ognev had succeeded in getting the peasants away from their own allotments, they arranged them in their places.

"Now then, let's start," Kirka cried again.

He drew himself up and ran his eyes over the villagers. There were many of them: Ulka stood in the middle, next to Pavel Bykov. She looked at Kirka and smiled. Kirka smiled back at her. Only one person in the valley noticed their mute understanding; a deep anger against Kirka, both on his own account and for his daughter Zinka, rose in Ilya Maximovich.

3

The work did not proceed well. Mitka Spirin stood at Kirka's side, scarcely moving his spade; he did not bend his back, but glanced every moment or two at Shirokoye. Kirka was furious, but controlled himself, expecting that Mitka would soon settle down to real work. At last he could contain himself no longer.

"Be careful," he said. "You'll split it."

"Split what?"

"Why, the earth. You're going about it as carefully as if it was made of glass."

"You and your stupid jokes again," Mitka muttered. "Why only me? Have I got to work harder than everybody else?" In a louder voice he added: "Am I a labourer of yours? Did you hire me? Do you pay me wages?"

Kirka shook his head, as if stung by a bee.

"I wouldn't keep you for half an hour if I had to pay you wages."

Mitka leaned back and grimaced.

"Foo!" Kirka spat on the ground.

"You can spit. . . ." Mitka swallowed the last words and began to chip at the hard soil.

Kirka went aside to a higher part of the ground and surveyed the work. The peasants were smoking, scratching themselves and staring at the sky; the women called to each other, and here and there a heated dispute arose between the villagers from Krivaya and Zaovrazhenoye. Zakhar Kataev alone put all his strength into the work, and at the dam the peasants, directed by Ognev, were getting along well. The men carried gravel and manure, the tractor was loaded with planks of wood. Behind the willow tree where Grandfather Katai sat, Shlenka was hopping about, slapping his spade on the ground, now on one spot, now on another.

"What are you doing there?" Kirka cried to him.

"There's a little snake here, Kirill Senafontich. And he won't crawl over the spade. He goes to one side, and I put the spade there, and then he crawls away again; he won't go over it."

Kirka looked sternly at Shlenka.

"He's doing it on purpose, just to make me wild."

"Don't you like it, eh?" Shlenka smacked his lips and cut the snake in two with his spade. Then he went slowly towards the canal.

"Comrades!" Kirka shouted, standing on tiptoe. "You're all working as if for strangers. If you go on like this, we won't be finished by autumn, and everything will be burnt out. We're working for ourselves, so let's look sharp about it."

For a few minutes the peasants worked with greater energy, but again they slackened, straightened their backs and stared at the hot sky.

"Well, what can I do with you all?" Kirka muttered, and strode off to Ognev. "They ought to have a taste of the whip; they won't work."

Ognev looked intently across the valley.

"Yes, you're quite right." He reflected for a while, shading his eyes from the sun with his large, thin hand. "Kolya!" he called. "Kolya, come here and make a start with the tractor. The tractor will take off the hard crust on top."

In a few minutes the tractor was rumbling along the valley, and along the line marked out for the canal the twin ploughshares cut through the hard, dry ground.

"Hi, all of you!" Nikolai cried. "I'll dig the canal for you. Just you watch."

The tractor forged ahead, and the peasants drew back, watched it pass, and drew together again. The women spoke first, and the men joined in; soon they were all waving their hands and shouting, as if taking leave of the tractor.

"Yashka, go and liven them up. Set the pace for them. We'll stop here. Now then, set your backs into it." Ognev swung his hammer vigorously.

Yashka ran down the hill and mingled with the peasants who were digging the canal. Throwing back his head, he started to sing a song. At first only the young people joined in; soon the older peasants took up the words. In a few minutes the entire valley rang with their voices, deep, hoarse or shrill. At the dam, Kirka distinguished, in the general flood of song, the deep, full-throated voice of Ulka.

"That's right! That's the style! All together, like one big family!"

He threw off his shabby Red Army jacket, spat on his hands, and dug the spade deep into the earth.

"That's the way," Mitka said. He looked round and, seeing that everybody was indeed working hard, added (but this time without a smile): "That's the way. Let's get on with the canal."

Grandfather Katai left the willow tree, and came near the peasants.

"Children, we must run away from death."

Nobody heard him. Individual voices, cries and laughter were lost in the full stream of sound. Everybody sang. Even Zakhar Kataev, whose face was twisted by the effort to lift and throw the large, heavy clods of earth, took up the words in his hoarse voice, and scattered them over the valley. Only Ilya Maximovich worked in silence, but his thin lips moved under his beard, in time with the song.

"Hey-ho-o!" Ulka's voice swelled and mounted.

Ilya Maximovich pressed his lips together, but Kirka was carried away by her voice, and, raising his spade high in the air, he accompanied her in such a full, clear tenor that everybody, in surprise, stopped singing. For a few moments only the two voices could be heard; then the peasants laughed and took up the song again.

The singing died away, and only the heavy, rhythmical breathing of the crowd could be heard, the ringing of iron and the groaning of one or another peasant, lifting a particularly heavy load. The piles for the dam had already been driven. For two hours the villagers worked in silence, feverishly, as if seized by a passion.

Stepan Ognev wiped the sweat from his face with his sleeve; he dropped his hammer and looked over the valley. A human ant-heap swarmed there, and the channel, as if alive, cut a broad black path over the ground.

"Here it is . . . collective labour," Ognev murmured in a quivering voice. "If we wanted to, if we set our minds to it, we could move mountains."

Stepan's words reached Nikita Gurianov. Nikita straightened his back and looked over the valley.

"Ye-es. It was like that in the old days at harvest-time. We'd have two buckets of vodka for the harvesters—come

on, fellows! Put your backs into it, and in the evening you'll all have another glassful. And how we worked!"

Hearing Nikita's remark, Ognev shook himself in disgust, as if a pail of slops had been emptied over him; he lifted his hammer and brought it down with all his strength on the wooden pile.

4

Leaning against the fence which enclosed the apiary in the cherry orchard, Markel Bykov looked down from the hill into the valley.

The work had been going on for eight days. For eight days the peasants had sweated in the valley and Markel watched the dam growing and the canal stretching farther and farther —it had actually reached the hemp-field. He heard the rumbling of the tractor, the blows of the hammers, the songs sung in chorus. At night fires burned in the valley, and the men and women sat round the fire, keeping watch on the dam. Ulka came home at evening, lively and happy, and at supper she related all that had passed in the valley. After supper she returned to the fire.

"What on earth does she find in it? Most likely she's hooked up with someone there, and that's why it's her turn to watch every night. And with such a fool, you can't wonder at her." Markel glanced from Ulka to Pavel.

When Ulka stood up from table, brushed the crumbs from her dress, crossed herself hurriedly in front of the ikon and tied the kerchief under her chin, Markel muttered:

"You stand there in front of the holy ikon as if it was a mirror."

"What?"

"What do you think God is, a toy?" Markel was angry with Ulka, because she had not heard him, and angry with himself because he had spoken. Nevertheless he continued: "You behave as though it wasn't God, but just anything."

Ulka turned to her father-in-law, looked him straight in the eyes, blinked and ran off.

Markel walked out of the house after her and went up and down the hill beyond the threshing-ground, staring down at the fire in the valley as a hungry wolf, in frosty weather, stares at the beckoning lights of a village. Several times he began to take the path that led down the hill and along the

river-bank to the valley, to see what Ulka was doing, but he could not make up his mind and, instead, turned homewards. As he passed Kirka's house he saw Zinka, huddled in her shawl, sitting alone on the bench in the yard. One evening he met Ilya Maximovich. Plakushchev spoke to him for a long time about church affairs, saying that the people had lost all religion, and that everything, somehow, seemed to have gone wrong. Then he spoke of Markel's affairs, and suggested that he should keep a good watch on Ulka . . . and perhaps it would be best to send her away to the town.

"Let her live in the town for a while, as a servant-girl, or something like that, or else if you're not careful she'll bring an uninvited guest into the house."

Markel was annoyed at the hint and suggested that Ilya Maximovich should look after Zinka and not put his nose into other people's business.

"Well, I only said it just to warn you."

Markel put two fingers to his eyes.

"I've got my own peepers open, thanks."

On this they parted, and when Plakushchev's broad back had disappeared in the darkness, Markel shook himself as if he had just come out of a cold bath, and sniffed loudly. It was quite true, something might happen. . . . Ulka might really bring a child of Kirka's into his house. It was quite obvious that she was carrying on with Kirka, or would Plakushchev have mentioned the matter to him? And was Markel to feed a stranger? But that was not the real question, it was something else. Was Markel himself not strong enough? Did he not stand firmly on his own feet?

"Tsa!" He smacked his lips and opened his arms as if to embrace Ulka.

That had happened two days ago.

When Ulka came home the following evening she told them that Stepan Ognev and the fellowship had decided to build a mill by the dam. They had received permission from the District Executive Committee to use the old barn from Siava, and Ivan Shtirkin on the tractor had already brought half the planks of which the barn was made to the dam.

"And does that interest you particularly? Does it affect you?"

"Me? Oh no! I was only telling you," Ulka laughed.

Markel's wife, Matresha, wiped her mouth with her fingers and glanced at Ulka.

"There's rumours going round the village about you, Ulya."

Ulka looked steadily at the table.

"Oh well, you can go and collect the rumours. They're sure to spread with such a fool about. You brought a son into the world to be the death of others."

"Ulyana!" Markel shouted.

But Matresha was already in tears. Between her sobs she continued to recount the village gossip.

"Shut up, don't moan," Markel cried to her, and turned to Ulka. "Look here, you—I've had enough of you going to the valley. If you go there again you needn't come back."

"All right, all right."

She sprang from the table and ran to the stove to get her sheepskin coat. As she stood on a stool to reach for it, Ulka trod on Markel's cap.

"You're treading on my cap, can't you see?"

"Cap? It's a lump of dung!" She kicked it off the stool.

"Ulyana!"

"Well, what about Ulyana? I've always been called Ulyana. What about it?"

She was already at the door when it occurred to Markel that she really would leave the house. He stood up from the table, and wanted to cry to her: "Stop here!" but Ulka shook her skirts and slammed the door.

The next day she did not come home to dinner. Every now and again Markel left the bees and looked down intently into the valley, thinking of Ulka, trying to distinguish her figure in that human ant-heap.

Another incident caused Bykov great worry. A few days previously Chizhik had summoned all the bee-keepers and suggested that they should be divided into two groups, one to take their bees to the Dolliny valley, the other to remain in the village. In spite of the drought, the bee-keepers hoped to get a good deal of lime honey. Markel was placed in the group which was to migrate to the valley.

Markel could not deny that there was a drought, but he strenuously opposed the suggestion.

"How can I go? I've got my position to think of. I can't carry God's house with me, can I? Just think a minute, if I take my candles there, and somebody wants a candle, can they run all the way to the Dolliny valley?"

"Well, you've got to make your mind up between the two,"

Chizhik cut him short. "You either keep bees, or you deal in candles."

"And can't I change over? Is there anyone I can change over with?"

Not one of the bee-keepers was willing to change places with Markel.

"You're godless people, all of you, godless people," Markel said, and left the meeting.

Now, looking down at the valley, he frequently glanced to the right where, at about half a *verst* from his own apiary, Chizhik and his group had mobilised a whole army of hives. A short while ago Chizhik had come over to Markel, and said:

"You'd better go, Markel Petrovich, or we'll put an end to your bees. You'd better give in. You're still young at bee-keeping, and you don't know what we others can do. We'll put an end to all your bees."

"Why have you got so much evil in you?" Markel said, smiling.

"Because you're making trouble; other people will follow your example, and think they can do just as they like."

"Well, it's all your own fault."

"All right, but you look out."

For the last hour or more something peculiar had been happening among the bees. Chizhik had poured something into a bucket and went from hive to hive, spraying the bees; he opened the hive, sprayed some of the contents of the bucket inside, and shut it again.

"Most likely it's water, because it's so hot," Markel thought.

Buzzing angrily, a bee shot past his head, like a bullet. Markel followed its flight.

"It's not mine, curse it."

The next moment he dashed among his hives, shouting as if the earth under his feet was in flames. Numbers of strange bees swarmed about his head and attacked the hives, around which a life-and-death struggle was taking place. Markel's bees, disturbed by the flight of the strange bees, dashed out of their hives in defence and swept about in a thick black cloud, buzzing belligerently.

"Curse them, the little devils, the little devils. He did it on purpose."

At first Markel lost his head completely. Then he fell on

his knees, shut the hives, and tried to push the strange bees away, moving his arms as if he were planing wood. The bees droned angrily, stung his face and neck, crawled under his shirt; the air was darkened by their mass flight. Markel jumped up and ran into the tent. There was a small bucket of honey mixed with rat-poison in the tent, which Markel kept to kill mice. Quickly he poured the mixture into a few chipped dishes and placed them near the hives. Smelling the honey, the bees dashed to the dishes and, having licked the sweet mixture, flew back to their respective hives.

Markel laughed gleefully.

"I'll show you. Now see if you'll do it again."

About half an hour later Chizhik came up to the fence; the saliva dribbled from his mouth as he spoke.

"What have you done? You've poisoned the bees. Don't you know what you're doing?"

"What do you mean? Did I invite them over here?" Markel drawled nasally.

"Shut them in, shut them in," Chizhik shouted across to his group as he ran back, followed by Markel's laughter.

Soon complete silence reigned in the apiary; the strange bees had gone and did not return. Markel cleared away the dishes, opened the entrances to the hives and again leaned against the fence, looking down into the valley. His thoughts now were directed wholly to the plan of how to conquer Ulka. The gate squeaked. Markel shuddered and turned round. Pavel came into the orchard, waving his arms.

"Be careful, the bees will sting you," Markel cried. "Don't wave your paws about. Stop it, you damned idiot. Get into the tent!"

Waving the bees away with his hands, Pavel dived into the tent.

"I'll get rid of Kirka through Pavel," Markel thought suddenly. "That's the idea. I'll set Panka on to him. He'll spread rumours over the village."

Markel went into the tent and sat down by Pavel.

"Look here," he began. "Your wife . . . that man, Kirka, he's—oh, you fool!" he shouted. "Don't you understand? Kirka, the man who's chairman, he's got your wife, got Ulka." Markel used his hands to explain what he meant.

Pavel howled and roared; the words themselves were unintelligible.

"Only don't cut his head off, just talk about it in the village.

Say he's taken your wife away, say he crawls on your wife. Tell them about him."

"Who?"

"Again who! Kirka, the chairman, the man you took the note to yesterday. Our neighbour."

"Brm-brm-brm?"

"No, no, not Ognev. You devil, you're always dreaming about the tractor. It's Kirka, that scoundrel who's our neighbour."

5

For eleven days the valley rang with the sound of human voices, of songs, of the clattering of spades; at night the huge bonfire flared up, attracting the girls and boys from the streets into the valley.

For eleven days the pitiless sun scorched the cracked earth, withering the crops in the fields and yellowing the leaves on the trees and bushes. And each day Yegor Stepanovich Chukhliav clambered on to the roof of his shed, searching the glowing dome of the sky for a cloud. . . . But no clouds came; only the grey-blue heat mist crept up from the horizon and quivered over the fields.

"No clouds! Not a single one!" he muttered furiously, and together with Klunya he carried pails of water to the Cow's Island, to water his cabbages.

Sometimes Klunya suggested, hesitatingly, that he should go to the valley and help the others to dig the canal. Yegor Stepanovich frowned and hissed:

"Have you started again? Are you at it again? Bring the water. What do you open your mouth for?"

He seized the pails and ran to the river. The bank commanded a view of the whole valley; Chukhliav paused for a few moments, watching, and then ran back to his allotment, his bare feet pattering over the hard ground. He would perhaps have gone with all the others and done his share in digging the canal . . . but was there among them all another father whose only son had divided his father's household into two, and gone off to a stranger? There was not one among them all, and if Yegor Stepanovich turned up in the valley, everybody, all the peasants from Krivaya and Burdiashka and Zaovrazhenoye, would leave their work and stare at him, as if he were a strange and curious animal.

Yegor Stepanovich objected to playing that part; he did not want the villagers to sympathise with him when he was amongst them, and laugh at him when his back was turned. And they might not even wait till his back was turned: the people had changed so much nowadays; they would spit in your very face, and then wipe their mouths as if nothing had happened.

"No, I'm better off by myself. Good or bad, but by myself," he murmured, as he washed the insects off the cabbages with the water. "Where have they all come from, these fleas?" he asked Klunya.

Sometimes he spoke gently to Klunya, realising that she was as deeply hurt as himself.

"You mustn't take it too much to heart," he said. "That won't water the cabbages or plough the field. Don't worry yourself so thin. You're as thin as a stick. We've managed to live all right so far, and we'll carry on. We've never begged our way in the world yet."

But as soon as Klunya hinted that it might be better to effect a reconciliation with Yashka, Yegor Stepanovich cut her short, showing his large white teeth.

"Have you started again? Are you at it again? What are you standing there for? Get some water!"

On the twelfth day, when Yegor Stepanovich had eaten dinner and again came down to water the cabbages, he noticed that the valley was silent. Greatly surprised, he ran through the bushes to the other side of the Cow's Island and looked across at the valley.

All the villagers of Shirokoye had gathered by the dam; on the dam stood Stepan Ognev, Kirka Zhdarkin and Zakhar Kataev. For several minutes they discussed something, while the peasants waited silently. Then Ognev straightened himself, turned to the people and cried:

"Well, shall we block it up?"

"Block it up, block it up, Stepan Kharitonovich," the crowd shouted.

"So they've finished it, the devils," Yegor Stepanovich muttered. After a few moments he ran back to his allotment.

In great excitement (this final ceremony had been entrusted to Stepan Ognev by the inhabitants of Shirokoye as a particular honour) Ognev closed the last sluice-gate of the dam. Then he drew himself up again, and looked down upon the sea of heads, on the shabby caps and the many-coloured

kerchiefs. Whispering softly to each other, the peasants watched the water with strained attention, saw it gradually filling the small channels, reaching the bushes and spreading out into a lake which shone with a cool blue gleam under the ardent sun. . . . Only Ilya Plakushchev stood aside, thinking, it seemed, of other things. A few days previously there had been another village meeting, at which Ilya Maximovich was elected representative of the third land group. Perhaps he was thinking of his future activities, perhaps of something quite different. Whatever his thoughts, there was on his face no trace of the joyful smile which lit up all the other faces; nor were his eyes fixed with the same intensity on the water, which rose higher and higher between the banks.

"A wolf," Ognev thought as he looked at Plakushchev. He turned away and spoke to Kirka.

"Well, Kirill, we've conquered here. Another such victory and the whole front is in our hands."

Kirka's legs trembled with fatigue, his back ached. Silently he shook Stepan's hand and took a few steps forward. He wanted to speak to the people of Shirokoye about their communal labour, to ask them if the time had not come for them to take, in other matters too, the co-operative road opened by the fellowship. His thoughts galloped away with him like a fiery *troika*; he opened his lips, but only hoarse, unintelligible sounds came from his throat; his head swam and he fell forward against the parapet of the dam.

Ulka stood by the earthen embankment. Seeing Kirka fall, she wanted to rush towards him, but Ognev raised him and said softly:

"Never mind about talking, Kirill. We'll show them by deeds, by the result of our work."

"Water!" Petka Kudeyarov shouted, as if it was the first time in his life that he saw water.

His voice acted like a signal. The peasants shouted and bent low over the canal, as if swayed by a strong gust of wind. The water in the pond reached the level of the canal and trickled along it, a small stream, which was sucked into the parched earth with a gurgling sound, leaving only a damp, black path. Another thin stream ran down the canal; soon it broadened and deepened, the water foamed. Shouting and laughing, the peasants ran along the banks.

"Oh!"

"It's running!"

"It's filling up!"

"Look at it, look at it!" Petka cried, clapping his hands and frightening the children. "What are you doing here, kids? Go and have a swim in the new pond. Look, Shlenka's having a bath already."

His fat body glistening, Shlenka stumbled into the pond. Hastily the children tore off their shirts and trousers and jumped into the water.

Zakhar Kataev approached Ognev.

"I think it's about time to start watering the allotments, Stepan Kharitonovich. The people are quite crazy for joy. Look at them, hopping about like babies."

The happy laughter and shouts of the peasants ceased abruptly as Nikita Gurianov, standing on the dam, shouted:

"Citizens, it's time to water the ground. How shall we do it?"

Kirka suggested that they should start with the first allotment.

"Let's begin with Filat Gusev's land (Filat nodded, and grasped the handle of his spade tighter), and then we'll go along in order, from allotment to allotment, till we reach the end one, Markel Bykov's."

"Markel's turn will come in winter," Petka Kudeyarov laughed. "But it doesn't matter, he's got honey, anyhow."

"But I don't agree to that," Nikita Gurianov said distinctly. "Why should we arrange it like that? That way we'll have to keep the whole village here on the job, and there's plenty of other work to be done, besides watering the allotments. My opinion, citizens, is that we ought to water the land in groups of a hundred. We'll draw lots, and the group which gets the winning lot will water their land first. . . . And Kirill Senafontich, although to-day is in a sort of way your birthday, and although we are all very grateful to you and to Stepan Kharitonovich, we hope you won't oppose this."

Zakhar Kataev supported Gurianov. Gusev objected vigorously.

"It's better if we do it all together," he said. "Because, you know, when a thing's done all together, it's done better."

Stepan was in favour of Kirka's suggestion, but because of the victory which had been won, because the people had become gentle and kind, forgetting their antagonisms and enmities, and because everybody was under the influence of

a common joy, he himself relaxed and softened. He saw that they were practically all in favour of the suggestion to work in groups, and he had no desire to oppose their wishes, although he was vaguely conscious (as if, through the mists of early morning, he had discerned the trenches of the enemy) that Kirka Zhdarkin's method would strengthen the collective will created by the co-operative labour of the last few days, while Gurianov's method would only scatter and dissipate the forces which had been united. He smiled, thinking of the mill which was soon to be constructed, and remembering the gentle and friendly manner in which Nikita had opposed Kirka's suggestion—and was silent. At that everybody—even Kirka—laughed and agreed to Nikita's plan. Each group was to be given twenty-four hours to water their land. They drew lots.

The first lot fell to the seventh group, which consisted of sixty-two souls from the Gurianov family, twenty-three Olenichevs and the rest Spirins.

"Oh, the dogs!" Petka Kudeyarov cried.

"What?"

"You're in luck to-day."

"Hasn't there been a . . . a mistake perhaps?" Filat Gusev said.

Nikita Gurianov strode up to Gusev.

"What mistake could there have been, eh? We drew lots in front of everybody's eyes. Kirill Senafontich, you drew the lots. Tell them there wasn't a mistake, to stop their wicked tongues."

It was only the fact that the lots had been drawn by Kirka —Nikita Gurianov's enemy—which silenced the demand that new lots should be drawn, and even so some were still dissatisfied.

"Perhaps it wasn't his lot at all."

"What?" Nikita cried. "Look, isn't it my button? It's from my trousers—look here!" He raised his shirt, pointing to the place where the button had been torn off, turning round on his heels so that everybody might see.

"Lift it higher, higher!" the widow Lushka cried. "We've seen all of you now, except your navel."

The peasants laughed, and somebody called out:

"The next one, Kirill Senafontich."

Kirka put his hand into his cap to draw the next lot.

Pavel Bykov slipped out of the crowd and stood beside

Plakushchev, waving his arms and muttering unintelligibly. At first Ilya Maximovich could not grasp the meaning of Pavel's actions. Pavel howled and pointed repeatedly to Kirka. When at last he understood, Ilya Maximovich grew pale, his lips trembled and cold shivers ran down his spine.

"That's nonsense, Panya, nonsense. It's only idle chatter, don't take any notice of it. You come to my place, I'll give you some honey, sweet honey, eh? That's only gossip."

Pavel continued to howl, and Ilya Maximovich saw that he had been excited to such a degree that it was impossible to control or persuade him. . . . And then . . . Perhaps, at any other time, Plakushchev would not have done what he did then; perhaps, at any other time, even torture would not have forced him to do it. . . . But the last few days, the loneliness of his defeat, Kirka's attitude towards him—Kirka had not said a word to him for several days, spending all his time with Stepan Ognev—the realisation that Ognev was gradually winning all the peasants of Shirokoye to his side, and that everything was slipping from his—Plakushchev's—grasp, urged him to do what, later, he often regretted in secret.

Ilya Maximovich seized Pavel by the shoulders and whispered, pointing to Ognev:

"No, no! Not Kirka, that's not true. It's him, look, that man—Ognev."

"Brm, brm?"

"Yes, yes. The man with the tractor. It's him who took your Ulka, not Kirka. Him, the man with the tractor."

Plakushchev walked away hurriedly.

6

Of the seventh group, Mitka Spirin's turn came first.

"Well, now in God's name," he said, hitching up his trousers and turning to Ognev. "Or aren't we supposed to talk about God now?" Then he called to his wife: "Elka, come here! Don't let the water go on anybody else's land."

Having stopped the flow of water in the canal with a large wooden board, he dug a small channel between the canal and his allotment. The water streamed over the allotment, which was planted with potatoes.

"Stop it! Stop it!" Mitka shouted to Elena. "Don't let it get on to Nikita's land. Look out—oh, you fool!"

The water reached the farther end of his allotment and began to rise, covering the limp, dusty plants. . . . There was a small hillock in the centre of Mitka's allotment, and however much he tried to direct the water on to it, it remained dry. An hour passed, and the allotment resembled a swamp; but the hillock was still dry, and Mitka was terribly anxious to have it watered.

"Look, you can see for yourselves, there'll be at least five puds of potatoes there, and if I don't get the water on to it they'll all be spoilt," he thought. Up to his knees in mud, he walked round the hillock, stamping his feet and splashing water on to it with his spade. . . . It remained dry.

On the dam, the peasants surrounded Stepan Ognev, Kirka and Zakhar Kataev. They spoke of rain, of the tractor, of machines. Pavel Bykov wandered in and out of the crowd, muttering to himself.

"Hi, you, devil's mug!" Yashka laughed at him. "We'd do all right if we harnessed you to the plough!"

"Brm, brm," Pavel growled, staring at Stepan with an angry frown.

"He wants the tractor; he's fallen head over heels in love with it," the peasants said, laughing. "He's forgotten all about the church bell, and goes about all day making noises like the tractor."

"Come on, then, you can drive the tractor for us," Yashka cried.

"Brm, brm."

"He's brumming again. What are you brumming about? You must have been made when everybody was at their prayers, you look just like it."

But the other members of the seventh group, and particularly Nikita Gurianov, stood by their allotments, angrily watching Mitka Spirin stumbling through the mud on his flooded allotment. Several times Nikita called across to him, at first softly, then louder, as his good temper vanished:

"Mitri! You're wasting the water, you're playing with it. Don't you know that water can't go up a hill? It isn't a horse, is it? Have you ever seen water running upwards? You can't do it."

"All right, we'll see, we'll see if I don't drive it up. Elka, come on, help!"

At last Nikita's patience was exhausted.

"What does he think he's doing? We've only got twenty-

four hours all together, and he's had the water nearly three hours already. That's enough. We're not going to miss our water because of your hill."

Nikita began to dig a path between his allotment and the canal embankment.

"Hi! Don't you dare!" Mitka roared. "What's up with you? You've never got enough. Are you in a hurry to get back to your wife? You'll sleep yet, the night's long."

Sakulya, Mitka's nephew, raised his voice.

"And where were you when we had to defend the Soviets? You were warming your backside on the stove, that's where you were. And now when there's anything going, you want to be the first. And it wouldn't be a sin if we didn't let you have any water at all."

Nikita's red beard shook.

"And you, what about you?" he burst out. "You were behind the lines all the time. You were fighting? Yes, we know. Fighting with the vodka."

"No, no, that's not true," Petka Kudeyarov put in. "He fought at my side."

"And what are you jumping up for? Are you Sakulya's watchdog?"

"Some fighters, both of you," Fadey Gurianov scoffed. "All you did was to fight over the spirits."

Petka retreated before this attack. At first he cursed himself for having interfered in the affairs of other people, but since the fight had already begun, he would not give in. He shouted with all the strength at his command, as if his voice would silence the Gurianovs.

"If you're so sure about the spirits, why didn't you go and tell the militia, instead of opening your mouth here? You know what they do for things like that."

"To the militia? The people there are just the same as Sakulya himself," Fadey answered quietly. "Fighters! . . . Oh yes, you all fight—with your wives."

"That's enough!" Nikita cried. "We'll take a vote on it, and the majority will decide. That's enough." Without waiting for the assent of the others, he cleared a channel through the embankment. The water, as if released from a prison, streamed over his allotment.

Mitka lurched forward, dragging his feet with great difficulty through the thick mud on his land.

"Stop it! Cut it off, I tell you, cut it off, or else I'll knock

you down. Do you think you're living under the old regime?" In his excitement, Mitka thrust his fist against Nikita Gurianov's broad chest.

Nikita stepped back and swung his spade against Mitka's mouth.

"Take that! That'll teach you to push me!"

"O-ow!" Mitka howled, pressing his muddy hands to his mouth. He fell on his knees. "Oh, I'm dead!"

The water splashed in all directions; the Spirins made a dash at the Gurianovs, the Gurianovs at the Spirins. The uproar frightened the blackbirds out of the willow trees; soon it was replaced by a low roar, by the dull thudding of fists, the ringing blows of spades. The peasants on the dam ran down into the valley and threw themselves into the fray, trying to separate the fighters; against their will, they were themselves drawn into the scuffle. Men and women came running from the streets, attracted by the noise.

Kirka, Ognev, Yashka and Zakhar Kataev dashed between the two groups, seizing the men by the scruff of the neck and flinging them aside; but they jumped up, and made for their opponents, their heads lowered, their arms held in front of their faces. Somebody struck Kirka twice, on the back and on the nape of the neck.

"They must have taken me for somebody else," Kirka thought, still trying to separate the peasants. A moment later a heavy blow descended on his temple; he swayed and fell on his knees in the mud. Above him he heard his assailant cry:

"Take that, for everything!"

"So they did mean me, after all."

Kirka jumped to his feet and turned round. Shlenka stood in front of him, his spade raised over his head, ready to bring it down on Kirka's skull. Kirka sprang aside and kicked Shlenka, with all the strength that was left to him, between the legs. Shlenka screamed, dropped his spade, and fell forwards.

"Take that, you bastard, for hitting a man in the back!"

He lifted Shlenka's heavy body as if it were a puppy, and flung him at the feet of the enraged peasants.

The fight went on. The weaker men fell to the ground, and were trampled into the mud. . . . Tufts of hair flew about; in the gathering twilight the blood on the peasants' faces gleamed darkly.

The women screamed.

Yashka Chukhliav stood at Stepan Ognev's side, up to his knees in mud, and shouted to Kirka:

"Kirka, don't rush about. Stand on one spot and give it to them, like the Japanese do. They're clawing at each other's throats like dogs."

Yashka hit the peasants about him with the edge of his palm; they fell silently to the ground. Nikita Gurianov dashed by. Yashka dealt him a sharp blow on the temple with the edge of his palm. Nikita snorted and crumpled up at Yashka's feet like a shot rabbit.

"Look here, look what a great bear I've knocked down!" Yashka cried.

At that moment Pavel Bykov flung himself into the fight; waving a crowbar over his head, he ran up to Yashka.

"Yashka! Look out!" Kirka screamed.

Yashka jumped aside and had not even time to cry out before Pavel's crowbar descended heavily on Stepan Ognev's head. Yashka sprang forward, and swung his clenched fist into the back of Pavel's neck. Pavel lurched forward and fell at Ognev's side, his face in the mud. Stepan rose to his knees and wiped his face with muddy hands; he felt a hot stream trickling from under his cap down his forehead; his back ached as if a sharp knife had been drawn down his spine.

"Yashka, help me! Yashka!" he cried.

Yashka bent over him, but a group of struggling peasants came between them, knocking Ognev down again and thrusting Yashka aside. Stepan felt their muddy boots and bast shoes trampling him into the earth; his head was half buried in the oozing mud. He spat out a mouthful of slime and dug his fingers deep into the soft earth. The only thought which hammered in his head before he lost consciousness was the desire to live.

"To live . . . to live . . . I've only just begun. . . ."

7

Walking hurriedly, looking from side to side, Kirka crossed the Shikhan hills. Before him stretched a sandy path, clear in the moonlight. (The moon itself could not be seen, but above him a milky blur quivered and melted into the surrounding sky); on either side stretched the pine-woods,

and the pine needles brushed his face. The woods were fearfully dark, and at times the silence was broken by an unexpected cry, by the muffled call of birds. The deeper Kirka went into the wood, the more intense grew the feeling of fear and uneasiness. Now and again he stopped, breathing deeply, and listening to find out if he was being pursued. Then he followed the narrow path again, lifting his heavy army boots in long, weary strides.

Soon the path turned downhill; the pine trees gave way to aspens and limes, and from the tremendous jaw of the Dolliny valley rose the smell of tar, of carrion and of heat. Kirka had decided to make his way by the Goose Lake, across the hill by the path through the aspen-wood, and so to Podlessnoye, where he could get the steamer for Ilim, but when he reached the valley he was too tired to proceed farther and fell asleep. . . .

He woke up at early morning, aroused by the yells of a wildcat, and sat down on the stump of a birch tree. From the Shikhan hills, out of the thick pine trees and limes, came a muffled, rhythmical sound, as if a thousand horses, shod in rubber, were trotting rapidly along a smoothly paved road. White geese cackled among the reeds which covered the lake and grey ducks fluttered over the marshy water. Above, in the soft blue of the morning sky, a vulture circled, its wings gleaming; wild pigeons, afraid of the vulture, flew over the valley and came to earth under a mountain-ash.

Kirka walked along the shore of the lake and came out into a small clearing: he noticed Kuzmich, the river watchman, standing some way off, and crept back among the bushes.

"Stop, stop!" Kuzmich cried, taking the double-barrelled flint-lock from his shoulder. "Where are you running off to?"

Recognising Kirka, he stopped and unwillingly lowered his gun; his eyes, which had burned with the passion of a devoted guardian, grew dull.

"And I thought somebody had come here to steal the fish. It's simply terrible the way they pinch the fish from this lake."

In the gesture with which he turned away and began to walk uphill, and in the tone of his voice Kirka observed a deep and secret hatred against himself.

"Kuzmich!"

Kuzmich stopped, and called over his shoulder:

"What are you hiding for, like a rabbit? You're always like that. You stir up the people and stir them up and then if anything happens you just clear off. . . . Fine builders you are," he muttered to himself, but in the stillness of the valley his words reached Kirka's ear and cut him like the lashes of a whip. He flushed a deep red. Shrugging his shoulders, he cried:

"I don't know who's hiding. . . ."

Kuzmich laughed softly.

"Who? Not me, I didn't hide in the bushes. Oh, you peace-killers!" he shouted out angrily, and disappeared among the aspen trees.

"He's laughing at me; even he's laughing at me. And in the village . . . what about Ognev? What about the fellowship—and Ulka?"

For a few minutes he stood motionless, as if rooted to the earth. Then, as if jerked forward by a lassoo, he ran through the aspen-woods and back across the Shikhan hills towards Shirokoye.

Within two hours the village lay before him, its chimneys smoking. About half a *verst* from the village, he sat down by the fence round the cherry orchard. On the other side of the fence Markel Bykov was bending over his hives. At first Kirka wanted to go on, but at the same time he felt a strong desire to meet his enemy face to face and to learn from Markel the mood of the villagers. He stood up and leaned against the fence. Markel straightened himself, walked backwards and forwards among the hives, muttering to himself. Suddenly he began to shout:

"Oh, you devil's brood. You're a devil's brood, that's what you are. May death run away with you!" He dashed into his tent and came out carrying a flint-lock. Having loaded it, he began to shoot at the swallows.

Kirka remembered that Markel had frequently boxed the children's ears for destroying the swallows' nests. Involuntarily he laughed.

"How's this, Markel Petrovich?" he called out. "Are you turning your gun on God's birds?"

Markel started, and turned to Kirka.

"I didn't know you were there. These swallows"—he tried to hide his anger—"they just gobble up all my bees. It seems they're very harmful birds, these swallows, and

particularly for us, for the bee-keepers. They're real devils."

"Have you got a lot of honey?"

"A lot? Just about enough to smear your lips with." Markel drew his finger along his thick lips. "I just slave and slave for nothing. And over there, they've all got jars-full, and I've got about this much from each bee." Markel measured off a part of his dirty finger-nail to indicate the amount. "Would you like to taste some, it's still warm?"

Kirka was astonished by Markel's coolness and by his loquacity concerning the bees.

"Perhaps nothing's happened after all," he thought. "It was just that I got frightened. I'll have to ask him."

"How's Pavel? Was he hurt badly yesterday?"

"Hurt? They killed him. And you say hurt. They trampled him so deep in the mud that we could hardly find him. But Shlenka got out of it all right, except that he's covered all over with bruises and bumps. You can see the marks of boots on him, they rubbed off nearly all his skin. Now he's at home in bed, and doesn't stop groaning."

Kirka felt somewhat relieved.

"But why aren't you at home?"

Markel shrugged his shoulders.

"What should I stay at home for? We'll bury him, and that's all. If I don't keep a good look-out here, those devils of swallows will eat up all my bees. Of course, I ought to be at home. . . . And on top of that, they've finished off Stepan Ognev, too, and Ulka's disappeared somewhere. She's so upset, of course."

"Who? What?" Kirka exclaimed. For the first time he noticed the malevolent glitter in Markel's eyes. He had seen the same glitter in the eyes of his dog, when it was chained to the kennel.

"Stepan Ognev, I said. . . . Oh, you devils!" Markel raised his gun and shot at the swallows.

The news that Stepan Ognev had been killed in the valley at first enraged Kirka; he wanted to destroy the whole village. The next moment he sat down on the chalky ground, powerless to move. It was as if all the strength had been beaten out of him, as the threshing-flail beats the grain out of the ears of the corn.

Below him spread the valley; the villagers, men, women and children, were trying to direct the water back into the

canal. The water had broken through the canal embankment, and streamed over the land, cutting narrow channels across the allotments. At the end of the valley, Grandfather Maxim Fedunov stood by the river-watchman's hut, observing the peasants. Zinka came out of the bushes, driving pigs. Grandfather Maxim ran up to her, and Kirka caught some of his words.

"I don't care . . . the pigs . . . the chairman."

On the threshing-field Nikita Gurianov was threshing what remained of the previous year's rye. His head was bandaged with a white rag, tied under the chin, his greasy cap shone in the sunlight. Guiding his horses round the circle, he cried in an encouraging voice:

"Gee up there, my lads. Gee up, my fine fellows!"

And over everything burned the heat of the sun.

Along the road which led across the Balbashika hills stretched a line of carts. The peasants were running away from famine, away to the sea, to Kizliar, to Siberia . . . to bread. . . . A woman was running after her little boy, who had jumped over the fence and was crawling on all fours along the edge of the valley.

"Catch him," she shouted. "Catch him, the little rascal!"

Everything passed by Kirka's eyes like a misty picture on the screen, incoherent, disconnected. Suddenly it seemed to him—the thought came unexpectedly—that peasant life was like the unending circle drawn by the horses on the threshing-field; bound fast to the earth, the peasants spent their lives turning on one spot. A vague, yearning grief overwhelmed Kirka. He stood up and began to ascend the hill. . . .

The shadows of the trees grew longer, stretching across the ravine, and cutting like arrows into the yellow grass of the valley. The day ran up the hill, accompanying Kirka. But where? The day knew its road, the sun followed a definite path; in an hour or two the shadows would draw back and lengthen again, and melt into twilight, into the even darkness of the night; and when morning came light would creep over the sky again, shaking her brightly coloured skirts and hiding the stars. But Kirka had no road. He had been flung out of the circle of peasant life, cast aside as a useless thing.

He reached the crest of the hill. The hazel trees were thicker and taller. Yellow leaves crackled dryly under his feet. Kirka sat down under a tree and looked about him as

vacantly as if he had just been awakened from sleep and was trying to remember the dream which he had dreamt in his sleep, but could not. At the same time he could not, as it were, throw off the impression left by the dream. It seemed to him that everything which had happened had been, somehow, deliberate; somebody had simply played a malicious joke on him; he had only to wake up properly, to rub his eyes, and he would find himself at home, in his comfortable house. Serko would be in the stable, and the cow in the yard . . . he had an allotment on the old swamp and there was Zinka—she had grown very fat.

Recalling Zinka, he shuddered; it seemed to him that he had been sitting in a cage for several days, and all the time somebody had teased him through the bars of the cage, leaving him no rest. Mentally, he reproached Zinka for his years of toil in the swamp and in the fields, blaming her because he had worn homespun trousers and eaten rye bread, while the wheat had been stored in the barn, as her father stored it. . . . It was because of her, too, that he had been flung out of the communal circle and had nothing to hold on to. . . . Then he laughed out aloud for, raising his head, he saw in the distance the peasants crowding into Stepan Ognev's yard and remembered the day when he and Stepan had gone down to the swamp.

"Yes," he thought. "I've failed, but Ognev . . . what about Ognev? Ognev is dead, but at least he has left a trace behind him, and I'm alive and have no road in front of me. No road."

And suddenly, as a spring bursts out of a rock, other thoughts and other desires awoke in him. Till then he had been, as it were, in a blind alley; until then he had been in a narrow gorge. On either side rose two high, smooth walls of rock, and above his head was darkness. And then, on the rocky walls, appeared human footsteps and Kirka felt (the astonishment returned whenever he remembered that moment) that he was not the same man that he had been the day before. He had been thrown out of the circle—very well! But now, as he stood aside, he could see better. It seemed to him that his very eyes had changed.

"Were-wolves!" he cried. "Were-wolves. They're eaten up by their cows, their horses, their allotments, their bits of bread, their lice; they're eaten up by it all. They cut each other's throats and work themselves dead for it. And I

followed them," he added softly. Kirka stood up and stretched himself, feeling a happy shudder run through all his body, as if he had just bathed in a cool river, and now stood on the sandy bank.

"Ah!" he sighed in relief. "I got Serko, and a house; you can always get that, but when the years go by, you can't get them back again, and you can't buy happiness, however many kopeks you save. We can go on; but not that way, not as we used to. . . ."

Soft footsteps sounded behind him. Kirka had not time to turn round; two hands pressed on his eyes and a voice said huskily:

"Guess who it is!"

At first Kirka thought that it was Zinka. (Often, waking him from sleep, she would ask him about Ulka, hoping that he would betray himself.) He moved his head, wanting to shake the strange hands from his face; two firm breasts were pressed against his back.

"Ulka?" he thought, and cried out: "Ulka!"

Ulka swung him round to face her, and both fell down under the hazel tree.

"Wait! Wait!" Kirka cried.

"What? Still playing the chairman? You'll never learn how to manage a woman."

"But leave me alone! Wait, you little witch!"

He raised Ulka and placed her at his side. She laughed loudly. Kirka looked at her small, strong teeth, her white neck, the scarcely perceptible fold under her chin, and her pink ears. Her whole face glowed.

"But do stop laughing," Kirka said, himself laughing against his will. "Stop! What are you giggling about? I want to tell you something."

Ulka became serious.

"Don't be sad, Kiryusha! Don't be sad."

"Tell me," he began, stuttering and getting entangled in his words. "You . . . tell me. . . . Well, now . . . are you . . . free?"

Ulka frowned. She had been looking for Kirka the whole night, and now he asked her whether she was free!

"I was always free. Well, why did you stop? Go on!"

"Well, aren't you upset at all? Aren't you sorry for Pavel? Whatever he was, still, he was——"

Ulka stood up, sighed, and bit her lower lip.

"No! Why should I be sorry? Such swine ought to be killed off, so that they shouldn't torture other people. Oh, Kiryusha!" She stared into the wood and shook herself vigorously. "I'm even glad. Now it's as if I was a girl again. And I have . . . but why are you bringing all this up now? Why?"

"Well, that's all right then. And now there's something else. Just say a man called you, a man who loved you . . . well, let's say a man like me. . . ." Kirka stammered and was annoyed with himself. Then he laughed. "Well, quite plainly: will you come with me? Away from here, away from the village?"

Ulka looked at the ground and plucked angrily at a hazel branch.

"And Zinka?"

"A goose isn't a good companion for a pig. Which of us is the pig, and which the goose, I don't know. I only know that our roads don't lie together."

For a long time Kirka spoke to her of other men, a different sort of man; there was much in it that Ulka did not understand. But she was happy, happy because he spoke to her, not of bread or horses, but of something quite different, something which was not, perhaps, quite clear even to himself. He spoke about a factory, and put her, Ulka, on a level with himself, with Kirka, who, that morning, appeared to her as a particularly great man. Her heart beat rapidly; she wanted to caress him, to stroke his shaggy head, as a happy mother tenderly caresses her first child.

8

The peasants crowded into Ognev's yard, protecting their cigarettes between cupped hands, and whispering very softly—as if afraid to disturb a sleeping child. Davidka Panov sat next to Petka Kudeyarov on the steps of the house. Petka's mouth had been injured during the fight in the valley, and he spoke with difficulty. He did not cease to mumble an account of how the fight had actually begun, his face distorted by pain, as he moved his lips. Now and again he cried out. The peasants told him to be quiet, and he was silent for a few minutes; then he began again to groan and mumble. From time to time a peasant came up to Davidka Panov and asked softly:

"Well, how is he?"

"Just the same," Davidka answered, putting out his hands as if the questioner wanted to step over him into the house. "He's just lying there," he added, pointing into the hut.

In the hut, Stepan Ognev lay on the bed. His head and right cheek were bandaged; his beard and hair had been cut off, so that he looked quite young; only the small wrinkles about his lips and eyes and the thick grey eyebrows betrayed his age. He lay quite still, without uttering a sound, only now and again he screwed up his eyes, and each time Grusha sprang up from the bench and put her ear to his lips.

"It's nothing. It's all right, only a little," Stepan whispered, trying to smile.

Again he lay silent and motionless. He did not believe that he was dying. The thought of death had come to him only at the moment when Pavel Bykov swung the crowbar down on his head; later, when they dragged him out of the crowd and carried him into his hut, he tried not to think of death, clinging to life with all his strength. In spite of the unbearable pain in his head (he felt that a large rusty nail was turning round and round in the back of his head) and although he often wanted to scream because of the pain, he tried not to groan. He tried to think of other things, to forget this nightmare. With the utmost concentration, he put his mind to this task, and Grusha saw his eyes change. Now they were clouded, now vacantly fixed on a corner of the room; at times they shone with a joyous light and then became cold and rigid, like icicles. . . . Grandfather Khariton's eyes had looked like icicles, when he lay in his coffin. Grusha bent lower over the bed, staring at his eyes which looked like icicles and stroking his hand, which had become terribly thin during that one night.

Observing her anxiety, Stepan signed to her to sit at the window, next to Steshka. Then his thoughts wandered freely again. . . . He saw a three-wheeled cart; the cart ran over the ceiling and the walls, and then dashed with incredible speed round and round his head and suddenly disappeared. Yegor Stepanovich Chukhliav jumped out of the back of his head, swam noiselessly over Stepan and sat down at the foot of the bed. His face was wrinkled in a horrible grin, and muddy tears fell from his eyes.

"Well, my son, you didn't listen to me, and here you are. You wouldn't listen to me."

"Go away," Stepan said. He wanted to kick Yegor Stepanovich off the bed, but his legs would not obey him, and his voice died away somewhere in his chest. "Go away," he cried again. "What do you want here now?"

"All right. I'll go," Yegor Stepanovich agreed. He turned a somersault on the bed and sat down again, stroking the soles of Stepan's feet. Then his hands, with their long, snaky fingers, crawled up his legs, pattered over Stepan's stomach and reached his breast. They pressed Stepan down. . . .

"Go away!" Stepan screamed. Something cool and pleasant was placed on his head. He opened his eyes. Steshka was bending over him, holding Annushka in her arms; the child was tugging at his shirt collar. He smiled, and asked Steshka to sit down beside him. Suddenly he recalled an incident which he thought had left no trace at all in his memory. The previous autumn he had left Ilim in a cart, which he had obtained from the District Committee after many requests. It was night, and the rain poured down. Before starting upon his journey, he noticed that the nut on the axle was loose. Examining it, he realised that it would not hold very long, but as he was about to put the matter straight, something happened, and he forgot to tighten the nut, although the knowledge that it was loose did not for a moment entirely escape his consciousness; but somehow or other he did not tighten the nut. When he had gone about ten *versts*, the cart sinking deeply into the soft, spongy earth, the wheel came off. Stepan spent a long time looking in the mud for the nut, but could not find it. The situation seemed hopeless. Had it been an ordinary cart, he could have broken off the end of his whip-handle, and used that to fix the axle; but it was impossible with this particular town cart. The wheels were fixed with screws, and nuts were essential. Stepan racked his brains, and at last decided to tie the wheel on with the reins and get along with three wheels. . . . He reached Shirokoye the following morning; the heavy autumn rain had poured down throughout the night. . . . Now, as he remembered this incident, Stepan smiled and concluded:

"You silly man! You knew you weren't in an ordinary cart, and yet you forgot about the nut. That's why you had to go in the rain all night; it was your own fault." He beckoned to Grusha and whispered softly: "See, they've shaved me now. . . . But don't you be frightened."

Grusha tried to laugh: she waved her hand and ran into the larder, wiping her tears on the way.

In the yard the peasants moved, and drew back from the window. Yashka Chukhliav, the doctor and Zakhar Kataev came into the hut, followed by the peasants, who craned their necks in hushed eagerness.

"Well, how do you feel?" the doctor asked gaily, taking off his dirty cape.

He asked for water, soap and a towel. Having washed his hands, he approached the bed and unwound the bandage from Stepan's head. In the silence everybody could hear the sharp sound of the bandage as it was torn loose from the wound. Drops of sweat glistened on the doctor's forehead; his hands trembled; at last he could not stand it, and dropped the bandage, saying in a soft, self-controlled voice:

"Are you made of iron? There's not a murmur from you." He turned to the others, and added in a kind, encouraging voice: "We'll have him on his feet quite soon, such a man can't stumble. You ought to have been a doctor, Stepan Kharitonovich, or a——"

Stepan screwed up his eyes and suddenly groaned. The doctor hurried. . . . When he had finished dressing the wound he stepped back and looked at Stepan, rubbing his hands, somewhat as a gipsy regards a fine horse.

"Oh yes, he's sure to get better. . . . Only you must clear the men out of the room. They can come in and have a look if they like, but then they must go home. Crowding round here they only disturb the patient."

"Now then—clear out, clear out!" Zakhar Kataev said. He opened his arms and moved towards the door, pushing the peasants in front of him.

The peasants went away. . . . Yegor Stepanovich Chukhliav stopped in one corner, and when the others had gone, he tiptoed up to the bed as stealthily as a cat approaches a sparrow and sat down at Stepan's side. Grusha waved her hand to the doctor; he did not understand the gesture, and stepped aside.

"I came to see you, kinsman," Yegor Stepanovich began. "I wanted to see how——"

Stepan was silent, staring intently at the other's face.

"Where did I see him before?" he thought. "Was he laughing or crying?"

"You see . . . they've put an end to you—strangers. If

you'd stuck to your own family. . . ." Muddy tears ran down Yegor Stepanovich's face.

Stepan beckoned to him. Yegor put his ear to Stepan's lips and caught the faint whisper.

"You're a child, Yegor, a child. If I'm not here . . . there'll always be enough of us to carry on. . . . Our family is big. But you, where is your immortality? You're only a . . . day labourer. . . ."

THE END

(*Continued from front flap*)

BRUSSKI: *The Soil Redeemed* is the third novel out of present-day Russia to be presented to the American public by **International Publishers,** as part of a policy of selecting for translation at early intervals the outstanding work of Russian fiction.

Previous selections have been A. Fadeyev's THE NINETEEN and Feodor Gladkov's CEMENT. Taken together these books present not only a cross-section of a fresh literary inspiration, but a picture of new, exciting life.

A complete view of modern Russian life and literature is presented in AZURE CITIES, a collection of short stories by thirteen outstanding post-revolutionary writers.

INTERNATIONAL PUBLISHERS
381 Fourth Avenue, New York

Gentlemen:

Please put my name on your permanent mailing list.

Name .....

Address .....

.....

BOOKS ON SOVIET RUSSIA

CEMENT by **Fiodor Gladkov**
A novel out of the turbulent years of the Russian Revolution, the Civil War and the reconstruction period with a Red Army soldier as the chief character of the story. $2.50

AZURE CITIES—
Stories of New Russia
A collection of short stories portraying the various phases of present-day life influenced by the Revolution. $2.50

RUSSIAN POETRY, an Anthology, chosen and translated by **Babette Deutsch and Avrahm Yarmolinsky.**
A selection of lyrics covering the period from Pushkin to the present day. $2.25

THE REVOLUTION OF 1917
by **V. I. Lenin**
All Lenin's writings and speeches from the overthrow of the Tsar in March to the first open conflict with the Provisional Government — the July Days.
Two Vols., Each $4.00 or $3.00

THE ISKRA PERIOD
by **V. I. Lenin**
All Lenin's writings between 1900 and 1902, covering the formative period of the Bolshevik Party. Books I and II. Each, $3.00 or $4.00

THE IMPERIALIST WAR
by **V. I. Lenin**
All Lenin's writings covering the first two years of the World War.
$3.50 or $4.50

SELECTIONS FROM LENIN
The first two of a series of volumes comprising representative selections from the complete works of V. I. Lenin.
Vol. 1, $1.25; Vol. II, $1.50

THE SOVIET UNION AND PEACE
A collection of Documents presenting the peace policy of the Soviet Government. $2.25

TEN DAYS THAT SHOOK THE WORLD by **John Reed**
An eye-witness' pen-picture of the ten days in which the Soviets seized power. $1.50

THE NINETEEN by **A. Fadeyev**
A novel about an heroic episode in the Russian Civil War. $2.50

MODERN RUSSIAN COMPOSERS
by **Leonid Sabaneyeff**
Aesthetic characterization of about forty representatives of Russian music, including Skryabin, Stravinski, Myaskovski, Prokofyeff and Rakhmaninoff. $2.75

ILLUSTRATED HISTORY OF THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION 1917-1927
Ten years of progress reported by the outstanding Russian leaders. Profusely illustrated.
Vol. I, $2.75; Vol. II, $4.00

AMERICAN POLICY TOWARD RUSSIA SINCE 1917
by **Dr. Fred L. Schuman**
An accurate and careful tracing of Russian-American relations since the Revolution. $3.75

MEMOIRS OF A REVOLUTIONIST by **Vera Figner**
A series of tableaux depicting the life of this famous revolutionary, who spent twenty years within the walls of Schlüsselburg Fortress. $3.00

LABOR PROTECTION IN SOVIET RUSSIA by **Dr. George M. Price**
A first-hand account of the protection accorded the Russian worker today. $1.25

OIL IMPERIALISM
by **Louis Fischer**
The inside story of the struggle between the American and British oil interests for Russian petroleum.
$2.00

EDUCATION IN SOVIET RUSSIA
by **Scott Nearing**
A first-hand account of education in the city schools, the village schools and the higher educational institutions under the new regime. $1.50

GUIDE TO THE SOVIET UNION
The first comprehensive guide to Soviet Russia. This 1000-page book contains valuable information to meet the every-day needs of the traveler. Maps. $5.00